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OR, THE

Tenderfoot IN THE Wild West.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE YOUNG TRAMP.

A YOUTH of sixteen was tramping slowly along the Overland stage trail, his face turned toward the west.

It was a face strangely full of character for one of his years, bronzed as though by long exposure, with fine features and look of

BUFFALO BILL ON THE TRAIL.

frankness and manhood that was most prepossessing.

He was dressed in a corduroy suit, top boots and a slouch hat, had a soldier's knapsack, rolled blankets and all strapped upon his back, carried a combination rifle and shot-gun over one shoulder and a revolver, hatchet and knife in his belt.

One glance into his face was sufficient to show that he was not "out for a lark," but meant "business," and though far from any habitation, following the lonely stage trail through a wild country full of deadliest danger, he was not one to back down in the face of difficulties, hardships and peril.

"Halt there!"

"We've got yer covered, and we is ther toll-takers on this trail."

"Hands up!"

The boy started at the rude and threatening challenge, but he saw no foe, and just where he had halted there was no shelter for him, though ahead, from where the voice had come, there was a group of rocks in which crouched his foe or foes.

He was not a fool to throw away his life where odds were all against him; so, after a quick glance behind him he said, with a light laugh:

"Oh, yes; I'll halt, and you are welcome to all you can rob a poor boy of, for I suppose that is your game."

"Yas, it's our game ter hold you up and lighten ther weight yer carry, for maybe yer is givin' us a bluff."

"Come! Hands up, fer ther coach is due soon, and we wants ter settle your case afore it comes along. Hands up, I say!"

The boy laid his gun upon the ground and raised his hands above his head, while he called out, in the same indifferent tone:

"Well, what now?"

"We'll show you," and with the words three men appeared in sight, each one covering him with a revolver.

They were hard-looking fellows, roughly dressed, bearded, and with long hair, while they were also heavily armed and the spurs on their heels indicated that they had but just dismounted.

The upper part of their faces was masked, but the boy had no curiosity to see them, and quietly watched them, as one who seemed to be the leader ordered:

"Leave your gun whar it is and come here among ther rocks!"

The youth obeyed, his hands still raised above his head.

"Now, fellows, strip him, and be quick about it, too!"

But, as the men laid their hands upon the youth there came a savage yelp and a huge dog bounded over the rock full upon them, while, quick as a flash, taking advantage of the change in his favor, the young Overland tramp shouted, as he drew his revolver and fired full in the face of one of the road-agents:

"Bravo! good dog! I'll help you!"

The sudden attack of the huge and savage dog, of whose existence they had not dreamed, and his bearing one of the men down backward, grasping at his throat, while the youth's revolver killed the second, rendered the third man helpless with fright.

But if the road-agent had lost his nerve, the youth kept his and shouted:

"Now, you up with your hands, for turn about is fair play!"

With the dead companion at his feet, the vengeful dog holding another upon his back, and a revolver pointing full in his face, the outlaw sullenly obeyed, and was disarmed with a promptness and skill that showed the youth to be an apt scholar in the ways of border warfare, if not an expert in it.

"Now lie flat on your face and put your hands up behind your back!" the boy directed.

"See here, young pard, them fellers made me do what I did, and I hain't nothin' ag'in yer, so don't be hard on me," whined the man.

"Bah! Don't play the baby act! Do as I tell you! Hold him, Chum, while I tie this fellow."

The dog's low growl showed that he had his game all right, and, taking the lariat which was slung around the man's neck, the youth securely bound his prisoner, and then turned to the one he had shot.

"Oh, Lordy! He's dead!" was the startled boy's exclamation. "I'm awful sorry, and—why, Chum, you have killed that fellow, too!—Oh! What shall I do? I'll surely be hanged for this if it becomes known."

And, while the now thoroughly alarmed youth stood gazing with white face down upon the two dead men at his feet, the road-agent saw his chance; his assurance came back to him and he said, eagerly:

"Yas, they hangs men out here for killin'; and without trial, too; but I'll lend yer a hand and help yer out o' yer bad fix ef you goes easy on me an' keeps that brute off'n me."

CHAPTER II.

THE ESCAPE.

The youth looked at the outlaw an instant, and quickly his nerve, shaken by having taken his first human life, returned to him and he broke out into a laugh.

The man looked at him anxiously and said, with a growl:

"I don't see nothin' funny in yer hangin'—that I don't!"

"Oh, you don't, eh? But you would think it funny if I was fool enough to accept your services. I was attacked by you three cut-purses, and but for my good dog there, my body-guard, that was lagging behind, you would have set me adrift without a dollar, a blanket, a mouthful of food; so, in protecting myself, I am no more to blame than is Chum. We simply took human life in self-defense."

"Ther Vigilantes will say different, little pard."

"What will they say about you and your hold-up game?"

"They won't believe what you say, stranger; that's dead sure."

"Oh, won't they? We'll take our chances on their not being such fools as to suppose a lone boy would attempt to rob three men."

"Come, I want to be on my way, so just help me to tie these two dead pards of yours up on that tree out of the reach of the wolves; that's humanity. After that we'll proceed on our way and can reach the stage station by night, if no more hold-ups prevent."

"Say, young feller, what is you doin' out in this country, anyhow?—you, a little tenderfoot, all alone?"

"That is my business, not yours. I don't give information to such as you on demand."

"Don't get huffy, boy pard, for I wanted ter say ef yer come out here ter make yer fortin' I kin help yer on that lay-out, big!"

"Oh, can you? Well, I am not stuck on the partnership—not much, I am not!" and the lad laughed lightly at the idea.

"Now yer hain't none too rich, I take it, and my pards here has got considerable money about 'em, not ter speak of ther weepins and horses, over ther hill yonder."

"Well?"

"Now I'll give up all ef I go."

"I've got all now, and you in the gain, haven't I?"

The man smothered an oath and tried again.

"I meant ter say, ef yer would go with me I'd take yer inter a gold claim I has and which will pan out big money. Yes, a fortin' for both of us!"

"Why, then, were you not leading an honest life by working the rich claim instead of lying in wait to rob stage coaches? I was not your game, I well know, only I came along first and you concluded to rob, perhaps to kill me, and then look for the big haul you had planned."

"It hain't so, and I tell yer I'll make yer fortin' if yer'll let me go."

The man started, listened an instant, and then, as he heard a rumbling sound down the trail, cried excitedly:

"For God's sake, young feller, let me go! Let me run fer it, for they'll hang me if yer don't!"

"Well, I don't want to be the cause of your being hanged, so help me with the bodies of your comrades, as I said, and I will—"

He paused, looked up quickly and beheld the Overland coach dash around a curve in the trail.

"Quick, for God's sake, quick!"

"Cut the lariat and let me scoot fer cover!"

"No; you must take your chances," was the firm reply, and the boy stepped out into the trail.

The driver, seeing him, and divining what had happened, drew rein at once and called out:

"Ho, boy tramp, has yer been held up by the Masked Miners of ther Overland?"

The driver sprang from his box as he spoke, while several heads were thrust out of the coach windows to know what was the matter.

"Yes, sir; they halted me and were going to rob me, when my dog Chum, here, rushed to my rescue and I took advantage of his fierce attack to shoot one man and the other surrendered."

"You are as plucky as they make 'em, little cuss! Just give us yer hand, and let me tell yer that Joe Jarvis, driver of ther Overland, is yer pard fer life, fer yer saved my coach and passengers from being robbed by these very three devils—no, I begs pardon, for I takes my hat off to a dead man, let him have been what he may—I means this one devil and his two pards," and the handsome driver of the Overland raised his broad sombrero to the two dead bodies, but looked at the living man as though he would like to send him on the long trail after his cut-throat comrades.

"I am glad if I served you, sir, and the passengers, but remember, it was only an accident that I did so, and I deserve no credit for it."

"Don't yer, with two dead men and a prisoner, as your game? Well, I should snicker! Does you all ask what was ther matter?" and, going to the window of the coach, Joe Jarvis continued:

"Why, ther matter is that but for this boy, for he don't look much more, I'd have had my coach robbed and you would have lost all you've got in money, if not yer lives, fer when ther Mounted Maskers holds yer up it's often done with a shot that kills."

"I met this young feller on my run East, yesterday, and told him he better turn about and hunt his home, but he come on, tellin' me he was on ther trail ter stick—ther plucky little cuss!"

"But I'm durned glad he did stick, fer

"I've saved us a hold-up, and you can see the royal flush that he's the chain lightin' youngster fer this country."

"But Chum it was, Joe, who saved me, sir!" protested the boy, confused by such compliments; "and—"

"Holy smoke! Boy, yer prisoner has gone!" broke in the stage driver, and all saw a horse dashing away with the prisoner in the saddle, his hands still bound tightly behind his back, with the rest of the lariat noosed over his neck.

CHAPTER III.

THE DRIVER'S RECOGNITION.

The prisoner had slipped away while the enthusiastic Joe Jarvis was singing the praises of the youth to the passengers.

Bound though he was, he had managed to unhitch his horse and mount him, dashing away at full speed with the risk of breaking his neck by a fall.

But without doubt he decided that it was better that way than to have his neck broken by a rope over a tree limb.

Joe drew his revolver and fired rapidly at the renegade, while he shouted:

"Where is your rifle, young feller? Quick!"

"Let him have it right in the back!"

The youth made a spring for his rifle, but did not fire, as the prisoner was now almost out of range.

"Well, let him go," he said, in his indifferent way, and then added:

"Chum could have caught him if I had given the word."

"Why didn't you, then?" almost angrily demanded Joe.

"Because I did not care to see the ruffian dragged from his horse and torn to pieces, as he surely would have been."

"Oho! there is a tender spot in your heart along with the pluck there, eh?" returned the driver, admiringly.

"Well, that's right," he added, "for yer won't go far wrong, even out here, while that feelin' guides yer; yet, now I fears, young pard, yer has turned a mighty dangerous sarpint loose upon yer track, and one who will show you no mercy if it ever comes his way to get even with yer for downin' him and his pards ter-day."

"But, come; we'll get along, and you ride with me on ther box."

"I am not rich enough to ride, sir—have got to travel on shank's mare," avowed the boy.

"Gosh darn yer, who asked yer for money, arter what yer has done for me and them under my care? Do yer want to make us all feel mean?"

"I do not accept pay for any such service I have rendered, by accident; so that's all right! Drive on, Joe, and I and Chum will take your dust, and so be under no obligations to any one," and he patted Chum affectionately, while the big mastiff looked up into his young master's face as much as to say, "Of course we will, if you say so."

"Oh, you be blowed, youngster! I'll jest make yer ride! Lordy! I fergot clean about yer horses."

"My horses?"

"Yes; them as them two galoots left yer ther heir to! Come, boy, we'll hev' a look at what them stiff's pan out, and then take in their horses, for all the rake in belongs to you."

"Belongs to me?"

"Yes, of course! Don't yer see, out here findin's is keepin', and you found them, so all is yours, you bet, and I'll fight ther man as says you is not entitled to everythin' the Masked Marauders of the Overland couldn't take along with them on the death trail."

"Come, I'll sarch 'em, and you keep tally," and bending over the body of the

man the youth had shot, Joe Jarvis pulled the half-mask from his face.

"Yas, I've seen him afore," Joe averred, and, proceeding with his search, he called out:

"Two revolvers, a bowie, a belt, a purse pretty well stocked with cash, a watch, a chain, and two rings. That's this jack-pot."

"Now to t'other one."

He removed the mask, but only to stagger back as though he had been struck a blow, while his face turned the hue of death.

"Do you know him, sir?" quickly asked the surprised and alarmed youth, while the passengers looked on with astonishment.

Instantly the driver recovered, and said quickly:

"No; I thought I did, but I guess—I do not know him."

The last words were slowly uttered, but the observant youth decided:

"He is lying, for he does know the dead road robber."

"Say, young pard, my leaders is gettin' restive, so yer see fer yerself what he has got on him." And the driver turned away.

It was the man that Chum had leaped upon, and his iron jaws had crushed the life out of him when he grasped his throat.

The search revealed a belt of money, a morocco case, which the youth did not open, a watch, chain, ring, and buckskin bag of jewelry, and his weapons.

"Will you keep these things, sir, all of them, for though you say they are mine, I'll leave them in your charge."

The driver hesitated a moment, and then said, earnestly, dropping the border dialect in which he had thus far spoken:

"Yes, I'll keep them for you, boy. It was your dog that killed him, not you."

"Yes, Chum killed him."

"All right; they'll be safe when you call for them."

"Now, we'll hitch the horses, one on each side of a leader, and the bodies we'll carry on top of the coach."

"I can give your dog a lift, too, if you say so."

"No; he can follow, thank you."

The horses were found to be unusually fine animals, and well equipped. They were unsaddled and hitched alongside of the leaders, and with his newly-found pard by his side, Joe Jarvis drove on his way once more.

But the youth, close reader of human nature that he was, was not deceived by the conduct of the driver. The light-hearted, reckless manner was gone, and Joe had assumed an air to disguise his real feelings, while every now and then he cast a quick glance backward at the body of the man whose face, when unmasked, had so startled him.

At last, as though anxious to forget himself, he asked:

"Little pard, what on 'arth brought you, a kid, out to these dangerous parts alone?"

"I came to see the country and to seek a fortune."

"You'll do both, for you are that kind, and yer don't look so much like a real pard c' mine for nothin', for you has got grit ther same as he has, and might be took for his bcy brother."

"Who is it you speak of?"

"Buffalo Bill, the scout."

"Oh, do you know Buffalo Bill?" cried the youth, with sudden pleasure beaming in his intelligent face.

CHAPTER IV.

ALONE ON THE TRAIL.

"Does I know Buffalo Bill, young feller?"

"Well, I should think I did, for if it was not for him I would not be here now."

"He saved your life, then?"

"I guess he has."

"Tell me about it, please."

"It? Why, it was a dozen times, for yer must know that he is Chief of Scouts at ther fort over ther range yonder."

"What Fort?"

"Fort Vidette."

"Oh! I have a most important letter for a soldier at Fort Vidette. How far is it from here? I should deliver it as soon as possible."

"An hour's ride, on ahead, we cross a trail that runs to Vidette, and it is just twenty mile from thar."

"Then I will take that trail, for I can get there early to-morrow."

"Go on with me to Mountain City, and you will find the mail rider from ther fort come after the mail to-morrow, and it's only thirty miles from thar."

"Thank you; I'll go the nearest way."

"Thar is fear o' Injuns, yer know."

"I'll risk them."

"And the Mounted Maskers?"

"You call those outlaws the Mounted Miners or Maskers?"

"Yes; that's the name they go by, for they goes mounted to their work, which is mining other people's pockets of their gold."

"I see."

"You can reach the fort in three hours on horseback from where we cross the trail."

"I'll go on foot."

"And got two horses?"

"They are not mine until the authorities in the city say they are mine, and clear me for killing the outlaws."

"What authorities?"

"The officials of the city."

Joe Jarvis laughed, and said:

"Officials of the city? Why, boy pard, bless yer innocent soul, ther only law out here is might, ther man who draws and pulls trigger fust, and ther city are only a big mining camp of log or board houses or dug-outs, where ther stage trail ends."

"Thar is no city, no authority but ther gun, and when I says these horses is yours, ther ther booty of ther—ther—" and, casting a quick glance at the bodies, he continued, in a lower tone:

"Ther outlaws is yours, my word goes, every time."

"Well, I will leave the horses and all with you until I come to Mountain City."

"When will you come?"

"Just as soon as I see the soldier I spoke of, and give him the letter I have for him."

"All right; I'll be thar, as I don't go back on my run for two days."

"Now tell me of Buffalo Bill, please, sir."

"You has heerd of him?"

"I have read of him, and heard of him, too."

"Well, Buffalo Bill is the king out in these parts, for he's a borderman from the sole of his foot to his scalp-lock, which ther Injuns would so like ter git, fer a fust-class prize."

"He is, as I said, Chief of Scouts at Vidette, and the soldiers, from ther colonel down, is stuck on him, for he don't get scared at the sight of an Injun; gun-powder don't fluster him; he makes no mistakes in guldin' and scoutin', and when he's playin' a game he knows when ter call yer, and holds ther cards ter win—four aces high, every whack up."

"He is feared by the redskins as an evil spirit, and the Mounted Miners is always on the watch for him, for they has had cause ter dread hearin' his gun go off; it's ther death-warrant, sure."

"More than twenty times he has saved me from bein' picked off my box by the Mounted Maskers lying in wait for the

coach, and that means he has saved the passengers and treasure as well, for them outlaws seems ter know just when I carries booty; and I'll tell yer, boy pard, I carries a rich haul for 'em to-day, had you not kept 'em from gettin' it," and Joe Jarvis gave another deep sigh as he cast a quick glance back at the bodies.

"Are the Mounted Miners, or Maskers, numerous, sir?"

"Nobody knows, or can find out, but it's a corner-lot fact that they is too numerous for comfort, and once they war in force enough to whip off a guard that went with the coach, and they got their booty, too, after a red-hot fight.

"Sometimes the coach is held up and only one man is seen, but yer kin bet high that the others is around; then, again, half a dozen show themselves.

"They robs the miners, ther lone cabins, and ther ranches. Ther only man they seems ter fear is Buffalo Bill, but he can't be a scout, guide, Injun-fighter and outlaw catcher all at the same time, yer know?"

"Will Buffalo Bill be at the fort?"

"Like as not; yet you is liable ter run upon him anywhar. But, ther is ther trail to Vidette, follerin' up ther stream whar I waters my horses."

"Thank you; I will find my way all right."

"Better ride, sonny, it's safer."

"No; I prefer to walk until I am sure about the horses."

"One would think you had been jumped for a horse thief, you is so 'fraid of riding one of the animiles."

"No, and I don't intend to be jumped," laughed the youth, as he got down from the box, and, with a wave of his hand, started off up the dimly outlined trail, Chum trotting at his heels, while, calling to his passengers, Joe Jarvis said:

"Folks, ther goes a kid who has got too much sand fer one o' his years. He's jest the boss boy of 'em all; you can bet yer bottom dollar on that!"

CHAPTER V.

AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

"Well Chum, we are once more on the tramp together," said the youth, taking to the trail as the coach drove on.

The dog wagged his tail and trotted on ahead.

"Ah! You feel your importance, do you, Chummie? Well, you saved me and no mistake. But I tell you I was afraid they would kill you the moment they saw you, for it's your style to be full of fight when ugly men are around.

"But you were too smart for the cut-purses, and I did not see you until you leaped from the rocks upon the outlaw you took in.

"Come, don't run off again, for I want you close by me this time, for we are on a mighty dangerous trail now, I suspect."

The dog came back and trotted along by the side of his young master for a while, then he moved ahead a hundred yards, and kept that position for several miles, following the trail as though he knew just where it would lead.

Suddenly he halted upon the summit of a ridge which they had been ascending for a full mile back.

The brute crouched down and kept his eyes fixed on something ahead.

"What is it, Chum?" and the youth advanced cautiously, the dog uttering a low growl.

Getting behind a thicket of bushes as a cover, the youth peered over the ridge, the land sloped gently down just there into a valley which was broken here and there by rocks and clumps of trees.

He could see that the trail wound down

through this valley as far as his vision could reach; the range upon which he stood formed one of the sheltering sides of the vale.

But something else caught his eye, and that it was which the dog had detected.

He beheld three horsemen in the valley.

They had not come along the trail, but from over the range on the left of the valley, and as the youth watched them he saw them reach the trail.

Halting, they seemed to be closely searching the ground, and then, as though satisfied, they crossed the trail and rode on toward the other range.

But they did not go far, for they flanked around and rode back to the trail again just where there was a small ravine fringed with cedars, and nearby half a dozen large rocks.

To the surprise of the youthful watcher of their movements they forced their horses down into the ravine and muffled their heads with their blankets.

Then the three moved up to the rocks, and they took position behind them, their rifles in their hands.

The distance he was from the men was not so great but that the youth could see that they wore masks, as had those that had held him up.

He also was near enough to see that the men in hiding there, with their horses hidden in the ravine, and with the trail from Fort Vidette running by within fifty feet of them, could only mean an ambush of some kind.

That it was for some one coming from the fort the position of the skulkers, open to his view, but hidden from any one approaching from the opposite direction, was convincing.

"I'll try and block their little game!" was the plucky boy's decision. "Come, Chum, we must make tracks, for we may save a life!"

Shouldering his gun, and keeping below the summit of the ridge, he began to walk rapidly along, the dog seeming satisfied now to leave matters in his master's hands, and trotting along at his heels.

To follow the ridge around and come out beyond sight of the three watchers was a walk of several miles; but the youth was a good pedestrian and went along at a swinging step, every now and then halting to creep to the summit of the ridge to see if any one was coming or any change had taken place in the position of the men in ambush.

Had he perceived any one approaching he would at once have run over the ridge and warned them of their danger.

At last he got to a point where he would not be seen by the ambushed men, and, going down into the valley, he was not long in finding the trail again.

"No one has passed, Chum, as far as I can see," he said, and then he moved on once more toward the fort.

He had gone about a mile when Chum, who was again acting as scout and guide, halted and sniffed the air.

"Well, old fellow, what is it?" asked the youth, at once on the alert, for he never disregarded a warning of the sagacious dog.

Chum uttered a low growl, his manner of expressing that there was something to be on guard against.

"Come into the bushes, Chum, where we can hide and see who it is, for they are doubtless coming this way."

The dog obeyed and the young tramp took up a position where, securely hidden himself, he could get a view of the trail a quarter of a mile ahead.

He had not been a minute concealed when a horseman rode into view, coming toward him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WARNING.

"Though I have never seen him, I stake my life on it that that man is Buffalo Bill!"

So earnestly said the boy tramp as he crouched by the side of the trail, his huge dog close beside him, and the eyes of both riveted upon a horseman coming toward them, his mount in a canter, his rifle across his saddle, and riding with the easy grace of an expert.

"I must not seem to be in hiding, so I will show myself," decided the lad, and he stepped out of his place of concealment, Chum at his heels, while the horseman was yet fifty yards away.

Instantly the lone rider reined his horse back, and his rifle was in hands ready for action, posing as a striking and handsome picture.

Horse and rider looked like a statue for an instant—the animal a splendid creature, a dark bay, and equipped with a fine saddle, bridle and trappings—his master tall, erect in the saddle, dressed in buckskin, armed with rifle and belt of smaller weapons, and wearing top boots and a light-colored broad-brimmed sombrero.

The face of the rider was as clean-cut in feature as though it were carved from marble, the mustache, imperial, and long brown hair falling upon his broad shoulders, giving him a most picturesque appearance, while he certainly was a strikingly handsome man, yet one whose every feature was bold, determined and intelligent.

His look, at first indicating expectancy of danger, changed as he beheld the youth, and observed that there was nothing hostile in his manner, for in that wild land he knew only too well what it was to look for a foe behind every rock and tree.

The youth halted in the trail, politely raised his hat and asked politely:

"Are you Buffalo Bill, sir?"

"Men so call me, my lad!" replied the horseman, courteously, and he smiled as he added:

"And who, may I ask, are you?"

"A mere nobody, sir, only a boy, but one who considers this the proudest moment of his life when he can serve Buffalo Bill, the great scout, of whom he has read and heard so much."

"Ah! and how can you serve me, my young friend, whom I am surprised to see alone here in this wild country?" kindly queried the scout.

"I am a boy tramp, sir, and I got into trouble back on the trail, out of which the driver of the Overland coach, Joe Jarvis, helped me.

"I had a letter for a soldier at the fort, and Mr. Jarvis showed me what trail to take, so, while coming along, Chum, here, my dog, gave me warning of danger ahead, and from the ridge some miles back, I saw three horsemen—"

"Ah! where were they?"

"They crossed the trail, seeming to examine it very closely; then they passed on toward yonder ridge and, turning back, rode into a ravine, but from the top of the range where I was hiding I saw them blanket the heads of their horses and then take position on each side of this trail behind rocks, as if to lay in wait for the coming of some one from this direction."

"Yes, lying in ambush for me, for they found out in some way that I was to come this trail," coolly avowed the scout.

"I did not know who they were waiting for, sir, but I was sure it was to kill some one, for they wore masks, like the outlaws I met back on the trail, and whom Mr. Jarvis called Mounted Miners."

"my little friend, that is who are, but how did you pass them?" "I went on around the ridge, coming into the trail again a mile back, and when Chum, my good dog, sir, gave me the warning growl, I went into hiding until I saw you coming, and then I recognized you."

"But we have never met before?"

"No, sir; but I have read of you, and once saw your picture in a New York paper, so I knew I had made no mistake."

"And you came on to warn of danger whoever it was the outlaws were waiting for?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are a brave young fellow, and if it is any satisfaction to you let me tell you that you have saved my life, for I was looking for no ambush on this trail."

"Give me your hand, my noble lad, and remember that Buffalo Bill is your pard to command from this day."

"Thank you, sir; and though but a boy I am proud to be your pard." was the earnest reply.

The scout smiled and asked:

"What is your name?"

"Ned, sir."

"Ned what?"

"Ned Osmond, sir."

"And your dog?"

"His name is Chum."

"Well, I feel that I have found two good pards in Ned and Chum; but what are you doing out in this wild country and alone?"

After a moment's hesitation, the boy replied:

"Tramping, sir."

"You belong to some of the border settlements?"

"No, sir."

"And you have come out here alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where from?"

"Boston, sir, for I am a Yankee lad," he said, with some show of pride.

"But, why did you come here, and alone?" and the scout fixed his penetrating eyes full upon the handsome, daring face of the Yankee lad.

CHAPTER VII.

HIS FIRST TRAIL.

Buffalo Bill asked the question as one who had a suspicion in his mind, founded upon his experience of why many a person had sought the Far West.

He knew that over the lives of hundreds of men hung a mystery, a shadow they cared not to have raised, and that many of them were fugitives from justice, from the gallows even, seeking to lose themselves in the wilds of an unknown land.

But here was a boy, a bright, daring-faced lad, tramping alone through a land where only brave men dared venture.

What had brought him to that region?

Had there been two or more of them he would have understood it as a boyish freak, love of adventure—a runaway, in fact.

But to find a solitary youth there, well equipped and travelling along a trail of peril alone, save for his dog, he could but suspect that there was some secret motive at the back of it, and so had asked the question.

Again the youth hesitated before he answered, and his face slightly flushed, but he met the scout's eye fearlessly and spoke frankly:

"I have done no wrong, sir, to cause me to hide myself here. I am a sailor lad, and have been so since I was ten years old; but now I am on a cruise in the Wild West, and came alone for I had no comrades to come with me."

"Well, my boy, you will find me your friend; but have you any friend at Fort Vidette?"

"I do not know a soul there, sir; but I have a letter for a soldier in the garrison, which his mother asked me to give him in person, for she could get no answers to those she had sent him through the mail."

"Who is he?"

"Sergeant Arthur Arden, sir."

"I know him, and one of the best men in the army. You will find him a fine fellow and a good friend; but now I must see about those fellows lying in wait for me."

"You can get by them the way I came, sir."

"Yes, but I don't wish to get by them."

"But there are three of them, sir."

"My surprising them will make matters equal, I guess."

"Do you intend to fight them, sir?"

"Yes, about that."

"May I go with you?"

"You are not in a hurry to get to the fort?"

"No, sir; my time is my own."

"Well, just jump up behind me, and we will go back the way you came. The ridge is covered with pines just where the ravine leads back to the range, for I know it well."

"We can leave my horse and your traps upon the hill and foot it to where the outlaws left their animals. Once there we can have it out, but I warn you that it will be no child's play, and you or I may be killed."

"I'll take the chances, sir."

"Good for you! Come along!" and telling the youth to give him his hand and put his foot on his, he showed him how to mount with ease to a seat behind him.

The splendid horse at once set off in a canter, caring nothing for his double weight, while Chum came along behind as though anxious to know what the result of his discovery would be.

Turning out of the trail where Ned Osmond had entered it, the scout kept the same pace back to the range, which he ascended to the ridge.

Then he went along below the crest, so as not to be seen, and at last came to a spot where he drew rein with the remark:

"We are about opposite the head of the ravine, so will leave the horse and dog here."

"Better take Chum, sir, for he may be useful. He is a very wise dog."

"All right, Chum goes. Leave your knapsack and extra traps here."

This was done and they slipped over the ridge into the pines, and were soon able to see the three men still crouching behind the rocks, and waiting.

"All right, pards, we are coming, so don't get weary," said the scout, grimly, and he led the way through the scrub growth to the head of the ravine.

Getting down into this, they pushed along until they came in sight of the secreted horses, and halting Buffalo Bill said:

"New, Ned, as you say this is your first trail, I'll tell you my plan of action."

"Yes, sir; I'll do just as you tell me," and Buffalo Bill saw that his young pard was perfectly cool and ready for what was to come.

"You noted the position of the rocks the men were hiding behind, two on one side, one on the other side of the trail?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, the two on this side of the trail are close together, and they are not sixty feet from the brink of the ravine; the other man is a hundred feet distant, and he falls to you."

"Take your position some twenty feet from me; cover the man with your gun, and I will demand their surrender; but if they show fight, why then there is but one thing to do, for it is their lives or ours."

"If they surrender, so much the better for us and the worse for them, for they will be hanged; but I think they will fight."

"All ready!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" and Ned spoke with the professional promptness and style of the true sailor.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FIGHT AGAINST ODDS.

The three horses of the outlaws, fastened down in the ravine, and with blankets over their heads, seemed to be getting restive, as though their instinct told them that something was going to happen.

Chum kept close at the heels of his young master, ready to lend his aid when needed, and thus the scout, his boy pard and the dog crept into the positions they were to take.

Peering over the edge of the ravine, they saw the three men were there behind the rocks, and could hear them talking to each other.

Had Ned Osmond wanted proof of why they were there he got it, for one of them called out, he the boy had his eye upon, and was to cover with his gun:

"Well, I've got ther patience of an Injun, but I'm gittin' weary awaitin' ter salivate Buf'ler Bill wi' a blue pill."

"Yer sh'u'd hev' got ust to waitin', pard, for we've been waitin' ter kill him a mighty long time," another answered.

"Yas, but this time goes, for I knows that I got it straight, that he was going on a scout along the stage trail and was ter start to-day, coming this way, and he'll come here, so don't git tired, pards."

"All right; I'm a stayer when thar is game ter be got."

"It is about an hour before sunset, so I hope he'll come afore dark, for he's got a charmed life, yer knows, and I don't want ter take no chances."

"No, and we don't intend ter. Fire with yer rifles, and at close range, when I gives ther word, and then work yer revolvers on him until he's full o' lead. We'll get him this time, never fear, an' then we'll have it all our own way in these parts. I'll call out: 'Halt! Hands up!'"

Like an echo came the words from over the ravine:

"Hands up!"

Three outcries of fright and surprise, three men springing to their feet, and then again the words in the scout's commanding tones:

"Hands up, for I have you covered!"

It was such a surprise to the three outlaws, to find themselves thus covered, and from the rise from whence they were expecting no foe or danger, that they were, for the moment, unnerved.

But, men of their stripe and accustomed to constant peril are not long in recovering their presence of mind and their vicious courage, and then they did two things simultaneously.

This was to fire at their foe and back quickly for shelter behind the rocks which had shielded them, but from the other direction.

Buffalo Bill was not the man to remain in shelter and fight a covered foe, and he leaped at once out of the ravine, the youth following his example.

Finding that his demand was unheeded, and that the men were to fight it out, Buffalo Bill threw his rifle to his shoulder with the words:

"Let them have it, boy pard!"

The youth's gun flashed almost as did

Buffalo Bill's rifle, for Ned Osmond intended to take no chances with a man rattling bullets at him as fast as he could pull trigger and which sung viciously about his head.

Down dropped the man he aimed at, while a quick glance toward the other two showed that Buffalo Bill had brought down his man. The other had darted out of sight behind the largest of the group of rocks.

"You killed your man, boy pard, but we've got the third one to corral, so look out for him while I walk around the rock, as we do when hunting a panther."

"All right, sir; I am ready, for I have my rifle again loaded," announced Ned.

With this he stood ready, while Buffalo Bill, rifle in hand, started to walk in a circle around the rock, from which he was distant about a hundred and fifty feet.

As he moved off he called out:

"You had better surrender, pard, for we intend to down you if you don't."

No answer came and Buffalo Bill continued his circling around, his rifle ready to cover the man the moment he caught sight of him, while his boy pard stood over by the ravine, also on the alert for a shot when the scout forced the outlaw to pass around the rock to his side.

But the man did not show up, though Buffalo Bill was nearly half around the rock.

"Don't you see him yet, boy pard?" called out the scout.

"No, sir; he must have crawled into some hole—there he is!" and the youth's voice rang as he suddenly descried the outlaw hundreds of yards away and running like a deer for the range of hills a little over a mile distant.

CHAPTER IX.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

About the large rock behind which the outlaw had taken refuge were a few stunted pines, some bushes and smaller stones, with a water-wash a foot in depth.

The scout saw at a glance that the outlaw, knowing his comrades had fallen, and feeling that it was a desperate chance with him, had thrown himself into the wash and quickly crawled away from the large rock.

Keeping the pines and bushes in a position to shield him, he had crept fully two hundred yards before he had to break shelter.

Then, with the eyes of the scout and Ned Osmond upon the rocks, he had not been seen by them until the boy from his position saw him first all of three hundred yards away.

"I'll catch him!" shouted the scout.

"Bring their horses!"

Then, placing his rifle upon the ground, Buffalo Bill tightened his belt and was away with a speed that Ned Osmond thought only a horse or deer could make.

But he did not tarry, and, running down into the ravine, he quickly tore the blankets off of the heads of the horses, unhitched them and, leading them up the steep path to the plain, leaped upon the back of one and, grasping the reins of the other two, led them.

He well knew that he had taken nearly five minutes to unhitch the horses and get started, but he was surprised at the distance the outlaw and the scout were already away from him.

The former had covered over half the distance to the hills, where he would surely find shelter to turn at bay on the scout if he still pursued him.

He still clung to his rifle, too, the youth could see.

But Buffalo Bill had cut down the lead of the outlaw fully one-half, and would,

without doubt, gain on him far more in the rest of the run.

The outlaw was straining every nerve, still running at his deer-like speed, though he cast quick glances behind him every few rods.

The scout was running along with apparent ease, and making better time, for he was surely gaining.

Ned Osmond pressed his horses hard, but with two to lead, and one a hanger-back, he saw that he was not gaining on the two men.

Suddenly the boy uttered an exclamation as he saw the outlaw halt, turn, drop on one knee and aim his rifle full at Buffalo Bill.

It was a moment of intense suspense to Ned Osmond as he saw the act of the outlaw and waited for him to fire.

He saw, too, that Buffalo Bill did not halt nor seek to elude the shot, but kept rushing upon him.

Then came the puff of smoke, the report, a glance to see the result of his fire, and the outlaw dashed the rifle to the ground and sped on again with renewed speed.

He had not killed Buffalo Bill, as he had hoped, but the momentary halt gave him a breathing spell, and no longer carrying the weight of the rifle, he ran with greater speed than ever before.

Seeing this, Ned urged the horses on the faster, at length determining to let go the led ones and dash on alone to either pursue the outlaw himself, or give the animal to Buffalo Bill on which to do so.

He, however, saw that Buffalo Bill was not being left behind by the fugitive, for he had not only increased his speed, but was gaining on the outlaw.

He could not refrain from a shout at sight of this, and decided to stick to the horses, so urged the three on as fast as they could go.

The horses, however, were not gaining an inch upon the fleet fugitive and his pursuer.

Certainly, Ned thought, he had never believed men could run like deer.

He had, however, come across two who were most fleet of foot, and he watched the race with the greatest interest.

The outlaw had now covered two-thirds of the distance to the range.

He seemed shaping his course for a point where there were ragged rocks and a thick growth of underbrush.

Could he reach there, armed with his revolver, he would be protected and could doubtless kill the scout as he came up.

Nearer and nearer he drew to the haven of refuge, and more and more Buffalo Bill gained upon him.

A glance behind seemed to convince the fugitive that the scout would catch him, or at least press him too closely for action when he reached shelter to prevent his taking full advantage of it.

So, in sheer desperation, he held his hand back behind him and emptied the six shots of his revolver with what aim he could get.

But the scout, still pressed on, and the empty revolver was thrown down and a greater effort made to run away from his tireless pursuer.

CHAPTER X.

THE BOSS BOY.

Again did Ned Osmond hold his breath with suspense as the shots were fired, and again he shouted as the scout still held on.

But suddenly he uttered an exclamation of surprise and alarm.

The scout was no longer gaining, and ran with a limp.

Instantly the boy dropped his rifle and was away.

He saw with a quick glance that the fugitive had to round the head of a water-wash, and he at once rode to cut him off, instead of riding directly on to where the scout had now halted and sat down upon the plain, apparently wounded.

"He shall not escape," said Ned Osmond, through his shut teeth, and he urged his horse to his utmost speed.

Fortunately the animal was the best of the lot and very fast, and, willing to go, he went along at a pace that rapidly lessened the distance between the fugitive and himself.

The outlaw saw the turn affairs had taken.

Buffalo Bill, more or less seriously wounded, was out of the chase, and he had a new foe to deal with.

The new foe was mounted, and, more, was gaining rapidly.

The detour he had had to make threw him back a couple of hundred yards, and there was no doubt but that his pursuer would overtake him.

The new foe was only a boy.

The outlaw had seen this in the fight at the ravine.

But he had stood up and faced the music and he had brought down one of his outlaw comrades, too.

The fugitive still had a revolver, though he had thrown one away and his rifle.

As the boy was mounted, and upon his own horse, the outlaw decided to make a bold play to come out victor.

So he decided to run more slowly, get a breathing spell, turn suddenly and bring down the boy, and then, gaining his horse, mount and ride back for the rifles of his comrades and have Buffalo Bill at his mercy.

The man could not refrain from a shout at his anticipated triumph, and glanced back over his shoulder.

To his horror the boy was not coming directly on, but had gone off at an oblique, as though to pass and get between him and the hills.

Had he divined his intention regarding him?

It would seem so.

Then he glanced toward the scout.

To his alarm Buffalo Bill was not lying upon the plain wounded, but was up and coming on once more.

But the outlaw saw that he came with a limp.

He, however, carried his revolver in his hand, as though expecting the tale would soon be told.

Having flanked the outlaw, gotten well between him and the hills, Ned Osmond began to ride back slowly toward him, also holding his revolver in his hand.

The fugitive had already halted, when within a few hundred yards of refuge, and now stood at bay.

The youth was about a hundred yards distant and between him and safety.

Buffalo Bill was coming on with a limp, revolver in hand, and several hundred yards distant.

"If you don't give up I'll kill you!" called out the boy in a voice which was heard by Buffalo Bill.

The outlaw dropped upon one knee, rested his left elbow upon his left knee, and thus with his hand supported his revolver, for he was panting like a hound from his long run, and, taking aim fired:

The shot passed near Ned Osmond's ear, and he returned it, his bullet cutting so closely to the outlaw that he quickly threw his hands above his head and cried: "I've had enough!"

"Throw down your revolver then!"

The man did so.

that the only weapon you have

"Cept my bowie."

"Throw that down."

The outlaw obeyed.

Then Ned rode up, still covering the man with his revolver, and, dismounting, took up his weapons.

To the saddle hung a lariat, and this the boy threw over the outlaw's head, ordered him to lower his hands, and then, walking around him half a dozen times, pinioned his arms to his side just as Buffalo Bill came up.

"We've got him, sir!" he called out in a glad tone as the scout appeared.

"You've got him, you mean, young pard, and let me say right here that you are the Boss Boy I ever struck the trail of in all my life."

"He's too durned fresh," growled the outlaw.

"Maybe so for you, though he's salted you away for future reference wnen I could do no more to run you down."

"I'll leave him with you, sir, while I go back and see about Chum, for I do not know why he did not follow me— if he had we would have soon caught him."

"Let us first see who this fellow is," and Buffalo Bill unmasked the prisoner as he uttered the words.

CHAPTER XI.

CHUM'S PRISONER.

The face of the prisoner, revealed as Buffalo Bill tore his mask off, was an evil one, but to the scout unknown.

"I thought I would recognize you, but am mistaken; perhaps I may be more fortunate with your two pards over yonder on the trail, and who forced us to kill them by not surrendering," said Buffalo Bill.

"Better die by bullet than by rope," growled the man.

"I am glad you realize your situation, to which your crimes have brought you."

"I only wish I had killed yer, Buffalo Bill."

"You doubtless have a grievance against me, as you are an outlaw, and you did your best to kill me, surely."

"Did he not wound you, sir?"

"Not exactly, see! That gave a shock that deadened my leg for a while and put me out of the chase," and Buffalo Bill held up his foot, showing where the bullet of the outlaw had struck him upon the buckle of his spur, denting it in badly and becoming imbedded there.

"It was a close call to shattering my foot, and at first I thought it had gone through, but it struck me hard enough to numb and bruise my foot."

"That was from his revolver, and this was his well-aimed rifle shot, and it prevented me from bringing him down, as I left my rifle and dropped one revolver from my belt just after starting, and would not stop for it. See?"

The scout showed that the rifle bullet had struck the hammer of his revolver as it was in his belt, breaking it and glancing off.

"Durn yer, suthin' seems allers ter perfect yer."

"Ther men says yer has a charmed life, and I believe yer has."

"No, just good luck; but you say that your dog is missing, boy pard?"

"Yes, sir; I cannot understand it."

"Then ride the horse back at once and see what is the matter, and I will follow with the prisoner, picking up those horses yonder, that have gotten tangled in their reins."

The youth seemed most anxious about his dog, and, leaping into the saddle, rode away, going back over the trail of the race to pick up the prisoner's revolver,

rifle and the weapons dropped by the scout.

He found the empty rifle and revolver where the outlaw had thrown them after firing, and catching the two horses, tied them to a small bush for the scout.

Further on he found the revolver where Buffalo Bill had dropped it from his belt.

Soon after he approached the scene of the fight and he gave a shout of joy as he beheld Chum safe and on duty.

The dog was seated by the side of the outlaw at whom the youth had fired, and who, though wounded, was not seriously so.

He had, however, fallen at the fire, and "played possum," hoping for a chance to escape.

That he would have escaped there was no doubt, had it not been for Chum.

But Chum realized the situation at a glance, and just as the youth started on horseback after the fugitive and the scout, Chum knew that it was his "inning" then, but as he was preparing to show the scout that, fast as he was on foot, his four legs could discount him, and the outlaw would never reach the range, a sudden movement of the supposed dead man caught his canine eye.

The outlaw had been too anxious, his curiosity had gotten the better of him, and in raising up to see if all was clear for him to skip, he had been seen by the dog.

Chum was a dog with a great mind, and with a glance at the scout, the fugitive and the youth, he seemed to realize that his duty was to remain behind.

So he rushed back at the wounded outlaw, who quickly dropped again on his back and once more played the "possum act."

Every time he moved to try and reach his revolver, lying a few feet away, Chum growled warningly, and revealed a set of teeth that were as dangerous as a shark's.

Then the man played the coaxing game.

"Pretty dog! good dog! nice dog!"

Now Chum had vainly on some accounts, his speed, strength, watchfulness and teeth, but he knew perfectly well that he was not a pretty dog, or a nice dog.

He was about the size of a flour barrel, had a head that was a cross between a bulldog and a buffalo, possessed long, sinewy legs, and his color was an ugly roan.

Chum did not object to being called pretty names, but the moment the outlaw made a move he growled and displayed his teeth.

Finding that coaxing did no good, the outlaw took to bullying and swearing.

But Chum was not impressed by either.

He simply paid no heed to anything save a movement toward that revolver, which he fully understood the use of.

Thus, when he returned, Ned Osmond found the dog quietly keeping watch over the outlaw, and he looked up in a way that said very plainly:

"I blocked his little game."

Dismounting and hitching the horse, Ned approached the man, who was again playing possum, and having removed the revolver from beyond his reach, said:

"So I didn't kill you, eh?"

"Well, I'm glad of it, for I do not like taking human life even when it is necessary to do so."

"Buffalo Bill is coming, so he'll look to your wounds."

CHAPTER XII.

THE DUMB SENTINEL.

Chum received a caress from the youth, and words of praise, which he seemed to fully appreciate.

As the man had two wounds, from the bullets the gun of Ned Osmond had been

loaded with, the youth did not bind him, but, taking his mask from his face, said:

"I guess Buffalo Bill will recognize you—he's coming now, and he's got your race-horse pard with him."

"Boy, if you'll let me take that horse and escape, I'll give you the belt of money I've got about me."

"I wish to make money, but not that way."

"Are you badly wounded?"

"I've got this wound on my head and another here in my shoulder—ain't they bad enough, so let me go."

"Ask the scout."

"That hangs me," groaned the man as Buffalo Bill came in sight.

When the scout heard of Chum's holding the other outlaw prisoner he said:

"Like boy, like dog—so I've got you at last, Pete Bender?"

"I told you that some day I would get my grip on you, for, sly as you were, I knew you were crooked; but it's not through any act of mine that you are caught, for this brave boy saved me from your bullets, and thus enabled me to corral you."

The scout had recognized the wounded outlaw as a miner he had frequently seen in Mountain City, and who was a well-known desperado.

"Well, I ain't dead yet, Buffalo Bill, and maybe I'll git you yet, and you bet I won't forget that boy, and the fellows will mark him for ther grave."

"All right, he doesn't scare worth a cent at your threats, but let me see if you are much hurt, for I will do what I can for you."

The scout examined the wounds, glanced toward the sun, which was near the horizon, and said:

"We'll have to go into camp for the night, and we'll go to the spring up on the range yonder, where there is good grass and wood also."

"Come, boy pard, we'll put that dead body on one horse, the two prisoners on another, and we'll mount the third, for it is nearly a mile to the camping place."

This arrangement was made, and, arriving at the spring, Ned Osmond found that it was in a tiny valley in the range, and that the grass grew luxuriously there, while there was wood in plenty also.

He had camped by himself along the trail, but was interested in watching how Buffalo Bill went about it.

The scout's horse and Ned's traps had been picked up on the way, and the animals were first watered and staked out in a good feeding place, the saddles and bridles all being arranged for quick use if need be.

As the scout still limped with his foot, Ned Osmond gathered the wood and built a fire, and the blankets of the outlaws were then spread on one side, those of Buffalo Bill and the youth on the other, Chum also having his bed, a rubber on one side and bear skin on the other, which his master faithfully carried for his use.

Taking a small medicine case from his saddle, Buffalo Bill dressed the wounds of Chum's prisoner, and then bound his own foot up in a bandage saturated with arnica, Ned Osmond meanwhile preparing supper, which he did like an experienced cook, drawing upon his own, the scout's and the outlaws' supplies for the meal.

The outlaws were given a good supper, and then with their hands and feet bound, were told to turn in for the night, their comrade's form, cold and still, lying a short distance away, covered with a blanket.

Chum enjoyed his meal and seemed to take most kindly to Buffalo Bill, who fed him, and then told him:

"Keep your eye on those prisoners to-night, Chum."

The dog at once went to his bed, near the prisoners, but, like the great Napoleon, slept with one eye open, for the slightest move of one of them caused him to show that he was not sleeping so soundly that they could take any liberties with them.

"Now, boy pard," said Buffalo Bill, lighting his pipe, "I have got to go on my way to-morrow, for I am doing a little scouting work that cannot be put off."

"But we will bury the dead man in the morning, have breakfast, and I want you to take the prisoners on to the fort, for there is a horse for each one of you, and remember, the animals and the booty the men here are yours, by the laws of this country."

"I will write a note, introducing you to Colonel Benham, whom you will find a good man and a firm friend."

"You will also find there the sergeant, Arthur Arden, whom you have a letter for."

"Will you undertake the risk of carrying the prisoners in?"

"Oh, yes, sir; we can do it."

"But I am not going, you know."

"No, sir; I meant Chum."

"Ah! your side pard—you bet you can do it—stick to the trail and it will lead you to the fort."

Ned Osmond then told Buffalo Bill of the affair early in the day with the other three outlaws and the escape of one, and after quite a long talk together the two pards turned in for the night, to be awakened later by a warning bark from Chum.

CHAPTER XIII.

A VERY CLOSE CALL.

When the outlaw who was captured by Ned Osmond took advantage of the coming of the coach to cleverly make his escape as he did, he showed that he knew his full danger should he be carried on into Mountain City by Joe Jarvis.

There were many wild spirits in Mountain City, but there were honest men and true, who were ever ready to punish crime when in their power to do so.

Those, too, no matter what motive had brought them west, who had claims in the mountains were most willing also to join in the fight against those who sought to despoil them of their property.

So, with a Mounted Miner brought a prisoner into their midst, it was more than likely he would be quickly tried by public opinion against outlawry, the sentence would follow, and the execution of it not delayed but very few minutes.

All this the man who stood there bound, while Joe Jarvis was talking to his passengers, fully understood, and he took his chances of escape.

Fortunately for him, his feet had not been bound, though his arms had been tied fast behind his back.

He saw the interest of the driver and his boy captor, noted that Chum was seemingly taken up with what Joe Jarvis was saying, and he quickly walked away, his heart in his mouth.

He reached the nearest horse, unfastened the rein from over a limb with his teeth, and by a dexterous movement put his foot in the stirrup, and mounted.

Then he started the horse off at a run, and was the next moment discovered, and received the shots from the revolver of Joe Jarvis unhurt, as he was out of range.

His hopes beat high when he found that he had actually gotten away, and he gave a commingled yell of defiance and delight.

Then he kept up his rapid run, fearing

that he might be pursued on one of the other horses, until he was sure that he had not been.

Allowing his horse to come down to a walk, he soon after halted him and began to consider his situation.

It was a bad one.

Try as he might, he could not release his hands, so that had to be given up.

If he had a retreat, it was too far away to reach readily, and the man at last seemed to almost regret his escape.

The horse, too, took in the situation, and, with a jerk, dragged the reins out from between the rider's teeth; but without hands the reins were useless, and the ends dragged upon the ground, as they were not fastened together.

Taking advantage of his rider, the animal roved along, cropping grass where he pleased.

If urged into a canter, he went as far as suited him, and then went to feeding again.

The outlaw's face was wet with sweat, his mouth was dry from profanity, his heart beat with dread, and his hands were inflamed and swollen from tugging at his bonds.

Thus the afternoon passed away and night came on.

It was a night of horror to the outlaw, for he did not know where the stubborn brute would take him.

He had roamed about until he could not tell just where the horse was taking him, and he was fearful that he would in the end take him to Mountain City.

Should he take him to some camp, he might tell a story of how the Mounted Miners had caught him, tied him, placed a mask upon him, and let the horse carry him away.

It might be believed, while at Mountain City Joe Jarvis would have already made known the whole truth.

So the horse roamed on through the darkness with his wretched prisoner.

Suddenly the animal pricked up his ears, uttered a low neigh, and moved more briskly on.

The outlaw rider at once saw the cause. The glimmer of a firelight was up the little valley before him.

Was help at hand?

It was a camp, but who was in it?

Nearer and nearer drew the horse to the camp, and then to the ears of the outlaw rider came the bark of a dog.

The next moment, in the firelight glare, the outlaw beheld Chum.

It was the same huge dog he had seen before, so it must be the camp of the boy tramp, while, catching sight of the horses staked out, he supposed there were men with the youth, and that they were looking for him.

The thought made him almost despair, and then nerved him to still struggle for life, so he slipped from the saddle, fell, rolled over, struggled to his feet, and ran down the valley with great speed, only anxious to place all the distance he could between himself and his hated foes.

Twice he heard the bark of the dog, and supposed he was tracking him; but he rushed on, and at last fell down, utterly tired out, when he found that he was not being pursued, as he had feared, by Chum, whose fatal grip upon his comrade on the stage trail he but too well remembered.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON SEPARATE TRAILS.

Buffalo Bill and Ned Osmond were on the alert at once, when alarmed by the bark of Chum.

The two outlaws were also awakened and prayed lustily that it might be some

of their band who would quicken them.

Buffalo Bill called Ned to come away from the firelight, and then the two waited until suddenly the form of a horse came into view.

He was riderless and his reins had been dragging, but had been stepped upon and broken off close up to the bit.

Chum seemed anxious to dart away in the darkness, but Ned recalled him, though he barked once or twice savagely.

"It must be the horse of the man who escaped from me," said Ned Osmond, as he and the scout stood by the side of the animal.

"It doubtless is."

"I will find out," and the scout called to the prisoners:

"Here is the horse of one of your men who escaped from my boy pard here to-day."

"It's Wild Jack's horse, that's a fact, but he wasn't no prisoner to no boy," said one of the men, sitting up on his blankets and looking at the horse.

"Wild Jack, eh?"

"Why, he's the lieutenant of the Mounted Miners, I've heard," Buffalo Bill said.

The men made no reply, for they felt that they had better remain silent.

"It settles, boy pard, that you were right; but the rider is not here."

"He may have gotten off, or been thrown, as his hands were tied behind him."

"Doubtless knocked off by the limb of a tree; but we can do nothing to-night, and in the morning I will take the trail of the horse and follow it, for I would not wish the man to be hurt and unable to aid himself."

"Nor I, sir; not that."

"The saddle seems to be still warm, as though not long deserted."

"What do you think of letting Chum take the trail?"

"I fear Chum would harm him, sir, before we could get there."

"All right, we'll leave it until morning," and Buffalo Bill unsaddled and staked the horse out with the others.

Telling Ned to stay in camp, he then made a short scout down the valley, but soon returned and once more retired, the youth remarking:

"Chum seems to be greatly troubled about something."

Again they sought sleep, Chum, as before, being the sentinel, but this time he sat up and watched for a long time, as though conscious that he knew a secret which he could not make known, for his keen scent told him of the presence of the rider near as well as the horse.

It was just dawn when Buffalo Bill aroused the little camp.

Ned sprang to his feet quickly and ready for work, while the two prisoners awoke to a dreary sense of what was before them.

Chum at once forgot all about him, having turned over to his master the guardianship of the camp as soon as he was awake, while he put in some solid licks of slumber, with both eyes shut now.

Coffee was soon boiling, bacon frying, a hoe-cake baking in the ashes, and all ready for breakfast.

The outlaws ate with little relish and cast scowling looks at the scout and Ned for seeming to enjoy their breakfast.

When all was ready to move the outlaws were placed upon their horses, their feet tied beneath the girths and their hands to the horn of their saddles.

"I think it best that you take the dead outlaw in with you, boy pard, as you have an extra horse now," said Buffalo Bill, and he firmly strapped the body to

...die of the animal that had come during the night.

He then fastened the three led horses together by a long lariat, one end of which he looped over Ned's saddle horn, and said:

"Here is the note to Colonel Benham, and you can go right back to the trail where we left it last evening.

"Stick to it and it will take you to the fort, which you ought to reach early in the afternoon.

"I will take the trail of this horse and see if I can find his rider.

"If you stay at the fort any time, and I hope you will, I will find you there, but if not I will meet you in Mountain City.

"Good-by, and luck to you."

Ned Osmond grasped the scout's hand warmly, and, mounting his horse, rode away, leading the horses carrying his prisoners and the dead body.

Chum took up his position in the rear, as though to keep an eye upon the procession.

As he rode away and gained the trail to the fort, just where the scene of conflict had been the day before, Ned Osmond glanced back and saw Buffalo Bill far up the trail, following at a canter the trail of the fugitive horse that had disturbed their slumbers the night before.

CHAPTER XV.

A TRYING ORDEAL.

When Ned Osmond was fairly on the trail, and out of call from Buffalo Bill, his troubles began.

He had found the place where he had halted the scout and warned him of his danger, and the man whom Buffalo Bill had called Pete Bender said:

"I see whar he turned off ther trail and I guesses it were here you give him ther word."

"Yes, I warned him here."

"Wal, yer played it smart for a boy, but I guess yer is a little clever."

"I'm nobody's fool."

"Like as not; but I heard yer say yer come out here lookin' fer dust."

"What is that?"

"To git gold."

"Yes, I hope to make my fortune."

"We kin help you."

"I don't just see how as you cannot now help yourselves."

"Wal, now, that's so, as far as helpin' ourselves is concerned; but we kin help you."

"In what way?"

"You is a tenderfoot, hain't yer, out here?"

"If you mean a greenhorn, yes; for I know little of this country, though I did spend a year on a Mexican ranch, when I was wrecked on the coast of Mexico, so learned something of the life."

"You has been a sailor?"

"Yes, I follow the sea."

"I wishes ter ther Lord yer had kept follerin' it."

"Why?"

"Wal, we hain't jest happy by yer comin' out here; but say, young feller, with no hard feelin's toward yer, we kin help yer if you says ther word."

"How so?"

"If yer takes us to the fort they'll hang us."

"That's too bad—for you."

"Now you knows we wants ter save our necks, and is willin' ter pay ter git it done."

"Yes."

"You kin jist let us give yer ther go-by, say we slipped our hands loose and bounced yer, and we'll pay yer big money."

"What do you call big money?"

"We'll give yer all ther scout took from

us, and which you has tied up there on yer saddle."

"Buffalo Bill says that is mine, anyhow."

"Wal, we'll do better, for if yer goes with us we'll make yer rich, 'fore ther Lord, we will."

Ned Osmond laughed and said:

"See here, you need build no hopes of escape, for I am not such a fool as to go with you anywhere to be bought off, and more, if I make money I'll do it in a square way, not by selling out to you."

"Yer don't want ter see us die, does yer?" whined the man.

"No, I will be sorry to see that; but I don't wish to see any one else die through your going free, and Buffalo Bill and Joe Jarvis have told me what the Mounted Miners have been guilty of, and you belong to that band of outlaws."

"It hain't so."

"Buffalo Bill says you do."

"Durn Buffalo Bill!"

"Does yer intend ter let us give yer ther slip?"

"Not for gold nor precious stones," said Ned, with decision.

"Wal, maybe after all we won't hang, and then you'll regret the day you refused us."

"Deed you will," chimed in the other.

As Ned had refused their entreaties they began to play all kinds of dodges to in some way entrap him.

One pretended to be taken suddenly ill, but Ned glanced at him, felt sure that he was playing possum and said to the other, who begged him to untie his comrade's hands and let the blood circulate.

"If he dies he will be in luck, for he'll escape hanging."

The man recovered soon after, and then they wished to halt and cook something to eat.

But Ned Osmond held steadily on his way, unheeding their plans to get him to free them.

Suddenly Chum went to the front, halted upon a rise ahead, and growled savagely.

"What is it, good dog," and halting, Ned went ahead and glanced over the rise.

What he beheld was by no means a pleasant sight, for a level piece of prairie was before him, several miles across, and a quarter of a mile away, coming along the trail toward them, was a band of Indians.

There were nine of them, and they were mounted.

In five minutes they would come over the rise and be where he then was.

It was Ned Osmond's first sight of hostile Indians, though he had seen groups of the noble redmen at the little frontier places he had passed in the last ten days.

He had read much of the Indians, both history and fiction, and when alone on his tramp with Chum it was the redskin he had feared.

But though he had also read and heard of outlaws infesting the trail he had not believed they would trouble a poor youth.

But his first experience and what they would do with him, was with the outlaws.

Now he was to face the redskins, and at a number of nine to one, for what could he expect of the outlaws in the way of aid, he felt.

It was a most trying ordeal, especially for a tenderfoot youth, and for a moment he did not know what to do, and felt like hastily severing the bonds of the two prisoners and asking their advice and aid.

CHAPTER XVI.

A BOY AT BAY.

Just as Ned Osmond was tempted to set his prisoners free, it flashed through his mind that Buffalo Bill had told him the night before that, as the road-agents made war upon their own race, they were consequently friendly with the Indians, to whom they gave presents in return for their protection.

If driven too hard by the scouts and soldiers, the road-agents would seek refuge in the Indian country.

It would never do, therefore, to have them give him advice and aid, decided Ned.

Chum was in a tremor of excitement, and seemed for once to have lost his grip, and to rely wholly upon his master.

His tail had dropped from the exalted position in which he was wont to carry it, and he looked up into Ned's face as though to say:

"Don't ask me to tackle 'em, for they are too rich for my blood."

"They are Injuns!"

The two outlaws quickly surmised that something was wrong, and Pete Bender called out:

"What is it, young feller?"

"Indians," coolly replied Ned, though he did not feel as he spoke.

"Injuns!"

"How many?"

"Only about a dozen."

"Well, that's enough to settle you, for Injuns is our trump keerd, young feller, and now just set us free quick, and we'll tell them you is a pard of ours and all will be well."

"I'm scared, yes, but not so badly as to do that."

"Well, we don't care, so have your way, for yer can't run, yer can't fight, and when they has yer in their grip you'll be glad enough ter beg us ter save yer."

"Just wait until I do," and gaining renewed confidence by the words of the outlaw, Ned determined to act.

The redskins did not suspect his presence there, and were yet nearly a fourth of a mile away, for but a minute or two had passed since he had first seen them.

He glanced around him. He saw no place of refuge near, but remembered that a few hundred yards back he had seen a little hill of rocks, the top of which was covered with a thick undergrowth of dwarf pines.

Instantly he leaped into his saddle and started at a gallop for the little hill.

As he crossed the stream, he let the horses drink, while, leaning over, he filled his own and the outlaws' canteens with water.

Hardly had he reached the hill and gone into the pines, when he saw the redskins come over the rise.

They halted quickly at sight of the fresh trail, and earnestly talked among themselves, as Ned plainly saw.

He discovered that they did not dash immediately forward and attack him, that they were dismounting and examining the trail while they were looking through the scattered timber.

It gave him a respite, and he took advantage of it.

The rifles of the three outlaws were upon his own horse, as were also their belts of arms and their ammunition.

But the weapons were not loaded, and he quickly set to work to load them.

The horses he tied back in the pines, there being some large rocks there.

"Hain't yer goin' ter let us git down?" asked Bender.

"No."

"Yer better make tarms with us now, for when them Injuns comes we'll tell 'em

you has us prisoners, and there is but one, so ter come on and take yer."

"If either of you call out to those redskins, I swear to you it will be the last word you ever utter."

"The Indians may come and kill me, but they'll find you dead!" said Ned Osmond, in a tone that showed he meant just what he said.

The men seemed crestfallen at this, for they had seen enough of the boy to know he would keep his word, so one said:

"Come, give up that you is cornered, and we has ther game, and we'll call it quits."

"Yes, throw down yer keerds and we'll act squar."

"When I give up it will be when I know that I am whipped."

"I don't know it yet, and if I have never fought Indians, I guess I can learn."

"Oh, Lord! let ther devil take that kid, for he's too fly for earth, too good for Heaven!" said Pete Bender, in a tone of supplication, and in spite of his situation Ned laughed as the other added:

"And let his dog go with him."

The top of the hill was not over thirty feet in diameter, and the dwarf pines and rocks completely concealed the horses and their riders from every point.

The approach to the hill was open, with no shelter to protect a foe, and Ned took in these advantages in his favor at a glance.

He also knew that the Indians saw the trails of four horses and must suppose there were that many white men to fight, and he had heard bordermen were never afraid of redskins unless there were big odds against them.

As he had his own combined rifle and shotgun, and the rifles of the dead and two living outlaws, with their revolvers, save one Buffalo Bill had taken in place of his weapon broken by Pete Bender's bullet, the Yankee had made up his mind to try and fight them back, deciding, in a last extremity, to try and make his escape by dashing out of cover on the best horse of the lot, leaving the outlaws behind him, and with Chum following him.

CHAPTER XVII.

NED'S BOLD VENTURE.

"There are not enough of them to surround this place, so I cannot break through if I have to, and maybe I can cut the nine down some."

So said Ned Osmond as he made up his mind how he would retreat if he had to do so, and he got his horse all ready for the flight, though hoping that he would not have to desert his prisoners.

Seeing the Indians now approaching slowly on the trail, he felt that they were very cautious although they must see that there were the tracks of but four horses.

This gave Ned courage, and more when it flashed upon him that there was also the trail of Buffalo Bill's horse, left the day before, so they might think they had five men to fight.

Turning to the outlaws, as the Indians halted upon discovering where their foe had taken refuge, Ned Osmond said:

"Remember, if you call out above a whisper, I'll turn my gun upon both of you, mind you—not one, but both of you—for then I'll not have you to worry me, at least," and as the Indians began to slowly separate to surround the hill, he raised Pete Bender's rifle to fire his first shot at a redskin.

In spite of their own situation, the two outlaws could not but admire the pluck and cool nerve of the boy.

His face was pale and stern, but his

eyes were bright, his look fearless, and he was determined to stand at bay without flinching.

Ned Osmond was one to take advantage of anything that arose in his favor.

His training at sea had taught him the value of coolness, to act quickly and well, and not to let himself become excited.

He saw the Indians felt they were in range, and was determined that his first shot would tell.

So he placed the rifle in rest on the limb of a pine, took careful aim, while Pete Bender said:

"Yer is a durned fool ter fire on 'em, for if yer hits one by accident, they'll make it hot fer you when they gits yer."

The remark did not disturb him in the least, and he replied:

"It's catching before hanging, I've heard; but look at the fellow with feathers enough on him for a bird, and see if I hit him by accident."

"Durn that boy!" growled Bender, and the rifle flashed as he spoke.

The Indians all started at the shot.

They were now sure where their foes were, and, what was more, the first blow at them had been a telling one, for their chief, "with feathers enough on him for a bird," fell from his horse, dead.

But Ned Osmond had been told to strike while the iron was hot, and, quick as a flash, he picked up the other rifles and fired, his own double-barrel gun giving the impression that there were five men, as there were that many shots.

Nor were they all thrown away, for a second redskin fell from his saddle, and a pony was killed, while, from the actions of a third brave, he appeared to be wounded.

The effect upon the Indians was at once noticeable, for they seized their dead comrades and retreated with all haste to a clump of timber beyond range, there to hold a council.

Ned Osmond was elated at his success thus far, but he was no Indian fighter.

Had he been, he would not have left his stronghold, but remained under cover, trusting to beat the redskins back again, and knowing that they would not, with their small force, dare remain long so near the fort, almost within hearing of the rifles.

But he had seen the outlaw on the stage trail slip away, and Pete Bender had done the same most cleverly, so he decided to do the same while the Indians were busy with their next plan of attack.

He did not doubt his being able to get away by himself, but he wished to take his prisoners.

So he said quickly:

"I am going to hustle out of this, for we can get well away before they see us."

"Yer don't expect us ter help yer, does yer, sonny?"

"I expect to kill you if you don't," was the quick retort.

"You've got spurs, your horses are well rested, and can run fast."

"I will see that you keep up with me, for if you don't I'll drop your horse and let Chum worry you for a while."

"You know what to expect, so come."

Ned leaped into his saddle, having untied the horses so as to have them not appear to be led.

He had reloaded the guns and hung them to his saddle horn.

"Chum will see that you do not run away, for he'll catch your horse by the nose and hold him if you attempt it."

With this Ned rode to the front, leading the horse carrying the dead body, but which he had tied a blanket over to hide what it really was.

The Indians did not suspect a retreat, and so he passed down the hill, which

kept them from seeing him, through timber, and had made a circuit around most to the trail to the fort, when the wild yells of the redskins told that they were discovered.

"Now, come on, and remember what I told you!" cried the boy, earnestly, and he urged his horse into a run, the other animals keeping pace with him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE MOMENT OF NEED.

Ned Osmond glanced back as he got his horses into a run and the Indians were in full chase, and muttered grimly:

"I've got over three hundred yards start, and there is the fort trail to follow."

Looking back again he saw that there were but six redskins following, but they were urging their horses to their utmost and gaining.

Try as he might, threaten as he would, he could not make the two outlaws do anything to urge their horses, though Bender said:

"We is doing the best we kin, pard."

"You are not, and they are gaining upon us."

"If I have to leave you they will find you dead!"

At this threat they did bring their spurs in against the flanks of their horses, and this added a little to the speed.

But the horse carrying the dead body hung back, and though Chum nibbled at his heels to hurry him it did no good.

Ned could have let the led horse go, but his pride was aroused to take all into the fort if he could.

For himself he did not fear, for he realized that he could get away at any time by deserting the rest of the outfit and Chum would follow him.

He knew that it must be over a dozen miles to the fort, and he did not know how near the redskins dared venture.

Nor did he know the nature of the ground he had to go over.

The trail was well marked, and he had no difficulty in following it, while he saw by the tracks that the Indians had come that way.

He had nearly crossed the little prairie and he saw beyond a wooded ridge.

Realizing that he had made a mistake in leaving the good position he had, he was looking well ahead to try and find a good retreat to stand and fight again, for he saw that the redskins would catch him within another mile's run.

He believed, too, that the Indians realized that he was carrying two prisoners, and, the blanket having blown off, they saw that one horse was bearing a corpse.

Ned began to feel decidedly in a fix, and his eyes were fixed longingly on the ridge ahead, to see what it had in store for him.

The Indians were now not over a hundred yards behind, and had begun to fire upon him, so, wheeling in the saddle, he took as good aim as was possible with Bender's rifle and pulled trigger.

The shot was useless.

He fired his own rifle barrel just as an arrow struck in the dead body on the horse he led.

The shot brought down a pony, but the rider caught on his feet unhurt.

Ned was beginning to feel that he must desert all and save himself and Chum, who was running rapidly along in the lead.

Presently he reached the slope, and, looking back, he caught the gleam of joy upon the faces of the two outlaws.

They felt sure that their deliverance was at hand.

The youth was at the end of his rope, so to speak, and to save himself, he must desert them, and they would not be harmed by the redskins.

chances were that he could not save himself, for the redskins were coming on rapidly and steadily gaining.

Having seen just what the brave boy was, they did not believe he would harm them when he could not carry them with him, and his words bore them out in this, for, as an arrow wounded him in the arm, he said:

"I am sorry I have to give you up, and I don't know what Buffalo Bill will say.

"The redskins are your friends, I hear, so if they kill you I can't help it.

"Come, Chum, we will have to get out of bad company."

But even as Ned Osmond spoke there came a puff of smoke from over the ridge, a shot, and an Indian dropped dead from his pony.

Another shot, and a pony went down, while suddenly there sprang into sight the tall, magnificent form of Buffalo Bill, rifle in hand, and he called out:

"Rally behind me, boy pard!

"We will give them all they want!"

Then loud and defiant rang the terrible war-cry of the scout, and he stood at bay, while Ned Osmond drew rein just over the ridge, halted the horses of the outlaws, and, leaving Chum to guard them, seized a rifle and ran to the side of Buffalo Bill.

"It's all over, boy pard, for see, they are making tracks with such haste they have left their dead comrade on the prairie," and Buffalo Bill pointed to the redskins flying back as fast as they had come.

"Am I off the trail, sir, or have you flanked around?" asked Ned, in wonder and delight at seeing the scout there.

"I have flanked around, following the trail of that horse, and it now leads across the track here and toward our camp of last night, so I will still keep on it, while you push for the fort again."

"I will, sir."

"So you were jumped by redskins, were you?"

"I did not expect that so near the fort."

"Ned told how Chum had discovered them, and what had followed.

"Never leave a stronghold, boy pard, at a venture.

"But you have done splendidly, and, as you said, could have saved yourself and Chum.

"The boldness of those redskins so near the fort shows that they are a scouting party from a large band, so tell the colonel I will keep my eye on them and it will be well to send some scouts and a troop of cavalry out here at once.

"Now push on for the fort with your prisoners, and I tell you again that you are the boss of them all for a boy.

"Luck to you," and Buffalo Bill mounted his horse, and as he rode by the outlaws said:

"He's a dandy, Pete Bender, isn't he?"

"Durn him!" growled Bender, and, mounting, Ned Osmond again pressed on toward the fort, once more leading the three horses, while Chum again held his tail aloft with pride.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW NED GOT THERE.

That the hopes of the outlaws had taken a great tumble goes without saying, and the flush on their faces changed to pallor again when they saw Buffalo Bill so unexpectedly come to the rescue.

"That durned Buffalo Bill are like a thumb, allers on hand," growled Pete Bender to his companion as they rode on once more, their horses in a slow trot.

"I'd rather hev' ther smallpox than see him," the other replied.

"Now, who in thunder expected to see him here, when he went off in t'other direction this morning?"

"It was a surprise to me, too, only it struck us differently," put in Ned.

"Boy, shet up—this hain't your funeral."

"No, Pete, it's yours," was the retort, and it brought a savage oath from both men.

"You learned to swear by note, didn't you?" asked Ned, quietly.

The men again swore, and Ned added:

"Don't, for you shock Chum—he was raised by a preacher and don't like profanity—do you, old dog?"

Whether Chum was trained or not, or preferred to hear himself bark to the outlaw's swear, I cannot tell, but he instantly turned and began to bark savagely at the two men.

Then silence followed immediately after Pete Bender had uttered his favorite anathema:

"Durn that dog!"

Ned laughed and Chum ceased his barking, while the two outlaws continued on with brooding silence for a mile or more.

At last Bender asked:

"Say, young feller, what is you goin' ter charge ag'in' us?"

"I am going to tell just what happened and let the colonel decide.

"I am what you call a tenderfoot out here, so I leave you to others."

"You hain't no proof ag'in' us, fer we was campin' and you and Buffalo Bill comed and attacked us, killin' our pard, here."

"Yes, and I attacked those Indians for the same reason—they were foes."

"But we wasn't."

"You wore masks just as the three men did who stopped me on the stage trail, and they were outlaws, and Buffalo Bill says you belong to the same band, so I suppose you will have to prove that you do not."

The two outlaws then made another dead set at Ned, to bribe him to go with them and not take them to the fort.

They swore they would enrich him if he did, that he could hold one a prisoner in hiding until the other went for the gold they would give him.

It was no use. Ned Osmond was not to be tempted, and remarked, in his laconic way of speaking:

"I've got a pretty good start already with the two horses the stage driver took in to Mountain City for me, and the booty he got from the men, with these four horses added, and what plunder you have—why, I'm rich, and I don't want the earth."

Again the men swore in chorus and then lapsed into silence. The horses having been rested, Ned started them into a canter.

It was in the middle of the afternoon that, upon going over a rise, the fort suddenly burst into view.

Situated upon a bluff overhanging the river, above which it rose a hundred feet, the approach to it was a gentle slope, with prairie stretching far and wide around it.

Upon these prairies were seen hundreds of cattle and horses, guarded by mounted men.

The flag floated above the fort, which, as Ned Osmond approached it, he could see was a very substantial affair, a heavy stockade of logs enclosing some dozen acres of the hilltop, which was well timbered.

A deep ditch had been dug around the outside of the wall, the earth having been carted within and placed against the stockade, forming a footpath for the soldiers, breast high, and where they could stand and fight if need be.

There were three bridges across the ditch, all of which could be raised and

lowered by block and tackle, and one of which led into the main entrance of the fort, the other two into the horse and cattle corral.

The officers' quarters, the barracks, headquarters, a park of artillery, soldiers on duty and scores of the denizens of the fort going to and fro gave Ned Osmond a grand idea of a frontier post as he rode up to the main entrance and was challenged by the sentinel.

He simply said that he wanted to see Colonel Benham, that he came from Buffalo Bill, and that was enough.

The corporal of the guard was called, then the officer of the day, and Ned Osmond found himself within a frontier post.

The eyes of many were upon him as he rode along, leading the horses with his prisoners and the dead body, while Chum trotted close by his stirrup, seeming to feel himself of less importance amid such surroundings, for his tail had drooped considerably.

"Well, I got there," muttered Ned, with pardonable triumph in his tone at his accomplishment, for, to use a slang phrase, "he got there with both feet."

CHAPTER XX.

THE SCOUT'S LETTER.

The officer of the day, a stern-faced captain, gazed at Ned Osmond and his "outfit" with considerable interest, though he asked no more questions than to know what he should do with the young visitor.

Colonel Benham's cabin home was a comfortable one, so situated that he could see from the board piazza along the front and sides over the stockade upon miles of landscape.

The colonel was a tall man, with erect carriage, and every inch the soldier in appearance.

He was a man with a record, from the days of cadet life at West Point, his services in the Civil War down to his renown as an Indian fighter in command of the far advanced post of Fort Vidette.

With nearly a thousand human beings under his command—artillery, cavalry, infantry and scouts—he had a fighting force that were thoroughly disciplined, knew their leader and were ever ready to do their duty.

To Ned's surprise he saw ladies and children also in the fort.

"Well, Captain Baldwin, you have a little Buffalo Bill there, I see," said the colonel, pleasantly, to the officer of the day as he approached with Ned, who had given his horses to a soldier to hold.

Certainly the youth was a small edition of Buffalo Bill in appearance, being much his style in face and form.

"I can only tell you, sir, that he wishes to see you, and he comes with a strange outfit," responded Captain Baldwin, while he added:

"He does look like Cody, indeed."

"I bear a letter from Buffalo Bill to you, sir, if I have the honor of addressing Colonel Benham," and Ned took off his hat, and his courteous address at once won the admiration of the colonel, as it had already of Captain Frank Baldwin.

"Well, young sir, I am glad to see you, not only because you come from my valued Chief of Scouts, but on your own account, I take it," and Colonel Benham held out his hand.

Ned was pleased with his reception, and quickly handed over the penciled note of Buffalo Bill.

"Sit down while I read it—he seated, captain, until we know what it all means," and Colonel Benham hastily first

read the note to himself, and then aloud to Captain Baldwin.

The note was as follows:

"In camp—Thursday night.

"Colonel Hugh Benham:

"Sir—While on the trail this morning I came upon the bearer of this, Ned Osmond, who comes West on business of his own, and who has a letter to a soldier.

"But for the meeting with young Osmond I would have ridden into an ambush, for three of the Mounted Miners had placed a trap for me, having in some way learned of my going by this trail.

"The youth asked to return and show me the place of ambush and aid me, and he did so, his dog, Chum, accompanying us.

"We gained the rear of the outlaws, and as they refused to obey my command to surrender, we fired upon them.

"The third man, for two fell, managed to escape, and I gave chase on foot, calling to the youth to follow with the outlaws' horses.

"He did so, and as a shot from the man I pursued had broken the hammer of my revolver, and another shot struck my spur, laming me, the outlaw would have escaped but for my young pard, who headed him off and held him up.

"Going back to see why his dog had not followed, he found him guarding one of the outlaws who had only been wounded, and but for Chum would have escaped.

"We went into camp here for the night, and toward morning were aroused by the dog, and a riderless horse appeared, and the youth will tell you about him and his previous adventure of the day on the Overland trail.

"I shall follow the trail of the riderless horse, and then continue on to attend to the duty that called me from the fort.

"About my young pard I know nothing more than I have told you, sir, but perhaps he may make known to you more regarding himself, but for real grit and nerve I have never seen his equal of his years, and his dog is a fit companion for his young master.

"I send the body of the slain outlaw, and the prisoners in charge of the youth.

"I have the honor to be, sir,

"Yours obediently,

"W. F. CODY,

"Chief of Scouts."

"Well, my young friend, I am doubly glad to welcome you, after reading Chief Cody's letter, and I congratulate you upon your good services rendered; but tell me about the other adventure the scout refers to."

Ned did so in his modest way and both the colonel and captain listened with the deepest attention and interest, and again congratulated him, and the colonel was about to order the two outlaws brought before him when Ned said:

"I have another report still to make, sir, and Mr. Cody told me that he thought it well for you to send a troop of cavalry and some scouts out on the trail, as there are Indians about, he fears, in large force," and Ned told of his fight with the redskins, his flight and rescue by Buffalo Bill just as he and Chum were about to desert the outlaw prisoners.

CHAPTER XXI.

A MYSTERY.

If Colonel Benham and Captain Frank Baldwin had been surprised at what the youth had done, from what the scout's letter had told them, they were far more so when they heard of his having been held up by outlaws on the Overland, and the result, following upon which came the story of his Indian fight, flight and escape.

"Where did you learn your frontier craft, Master Osmond?" asked the colonel.

"I do not know any, sir, other than what common-sense prompted me to do. I am a tenderfoot, sir," replied Ned, with a smile.

"A tenderfoot, eh?"

"Do you mean to say you are not a border boy?"

"I am not, sir, for I am a sailor."

"A sailor?"

"And this is your first border experience?"

"Except that I was a Mexican vaquero on a ranch, sir, when I was wrecked on the coast of Mexico two years ago; but it is different there from what it is here, though I learned to ride and shoot, and to throw a lasso pretty well."

"And how did you come West?"

"On foot, sir, from where the railroad ends.

"I was a tramp, sir," and again the youth smiled.

"Your home is where?"

"I have no home now, sir," and there was a pathetic cadence in the tone and words of the youth that touched both Colonel Benham and Captain Baldwin.

"Where was your home?"

"I am a Yankee boy, sir," and again the smile.

"I do not wish to pry into your life, my young friend, and ask, not from idle curiosity, but from interest in you, for you, a boy in years, come alone to the fort, having been attacked by outlaws and slain one; you see others setting a trap for some one, and you flank them and save my Chief of Scouts, and then go into a fight as his ally like an old veteran.

"Next, you have a brush with Indians, kill one or more, and escape with your prisoners from them, bringing them safely to the fort.

"This heroism in a man, in one of my officers or crack scouts, would interest me deeply in them, and I wish to know why you have come here and what I can do to serve you, for I will do all in my power for you, my brave lad."

After a moment of hesitation, Ned Osmond said:

"I thank you, sir, for your kindness and interest in me, and I appreciate it.

"But there is nothing that you can do, sir."

"You are too young to enter the army."

"Yes, sir."

"May I ask what you intend to do?"

"I am a poor boy, sir, and intend to rove about the West, hoping to make my fortune."

"Why not remain at the fort, for you write fairly well, I guess?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I have studied hard."

"I could give you a clerkship here."

"Thank you, sir, but I do not care to remain here, for I am going to Mountain City, and if I do not do well, or am not successful in my intentions, I shall return and ask Buffalo Bill to take me with him and teach me to be a scout."

"Beforehand I promise you he will be only too glad to have you, and you would make a name for yourself, I am sure.

"But had you no motive in coming to the fort, other than to guard those outlaw prisoners?"

"Yes, sir."

"I met in the East a lady who knew of my coming to this part of the West, and she told me she had a son who was a soldier at Fort Vidette and asked me to deliver to him a letter, as all she had written the past year seemed to have miscarried, for she received no answers.

"I told her I would deliver the letter, and I was on my way to the fort when I met Mr. Cody."

"Who is the soldier?"

"The letter is addressed to Philip Arden, but Mr. Cody says that he is a sergeant."

"Yes; and one of the best men in my command.

"Do you know anything about Sergeant Arden?"

"Nothing, sir, I may say, more than having met his mother."

"I'll send the letter to him at once."

"Please pardon me, sir, but I promised his mother I would deliver it only to him personally."

"Certainly."

"Captain Baldwin will send a soldier with you to the sergeants' quarters, and then return and be my guest, Master Osmond, as long as you remain at the fort."

"Oh, thank you, sir; but I'm nothing more than a tramp, and could not think of such a thing."

The colonel looked a trifle annoyed, and Captain Baldwin hastened to say:

"I will find him pleasant quarters with the sutler, sir. In fact, Sergeant Arden has a cabin to himself, since Macey died, and will doubtless wish him for his guest."

"All right; see that he is comfortable, captain, and the horses and their belongings are his property, you know.

"Also see that the dead outlaw is buried and the prisoners put in confinement.

"When you are settled, my young friend, come and see me this evening, for I wish to have a talk with you."

"Yes, sir," and with a courteous salute Ned walked away, with Captain Baldwin, while the colonel muttered:

"That boy is a mystery I cannot fathom."

CHAPTER XXII.

SERGEANT ARDEN.

So much was Captain Frank Baldwin pleased and impressed with the young self-confessed tramp, that he decided to go with him himself to Sergeant Arden's quarters and see that he had comfortable accommodations during the time he was in the fort.

He gave orders for the disposal of the outlaw's body, and the prisoners, and sent the horses to the stables to be well cared for, and as the property of Ned Osmond, while he said:

"Those are all fine animals, my boy, and should you wish to dispose of any of them, I will be glad to buy one, and can find you purchasers for the others, too, and their outfits."

"Thank you, sir; I will be glad to sell three of them, keeping one for my own use, and I have two more in Mountain City, so I will be quite rich, and in future I will be a tramp on horseback," and Ned laughed and added:

"I don't just know how Chum will take my riding."

"Who is Chum?"

"My dog, sir; that is his name."

"Ah! he looks as vicious as a grizzly."

"He is, sir, to those I don't like, but likes my friends."

"I'm your friend, please mention it to him," said the captain, with a glance at Chum.

Ned laughed, and called his dog.

"Chum, this is Captain Baldwin, who is good enough to say he is my friend, so you must treat him with marked respect."

Chum wagged his tail, seemingly pleased at the introduction, and then licked the captain's hand.

"Good! I hope he has a good memory, Ned; but where did you get him?"

"Some men were going to shoot him in Chicago, and I took his part, and treated the gang to a drink all round to let him off, and he seemed to understand that I had saved his life, and has stuck to me ever since."

dozen fights on Chum's account, but somehow we come out all right in the end."

"I should think so," said the captain, and he added:

"But here are Sergeant Arden's quarters."

It was a pleasant little cabin, apart from the others, and seated in front of it was a handsome young soldier, who had the appearance of a commissioned, rather than a non-commissioned officer.

Seeing the captain approaching, he laid aside a book he was reading and stood at an "attention."

"Sergeant Arden, this young gentleman is Master Ned Osmond, a hero, the colonel justly calls him, and he bears a letter to you."

"He is a Yankee boy, and may remain some time in the fort, so if you can entertain him I shall be glad."

"I am glad to meet Master Osmond, Captain Baldwin, and will entertain him with pleasure, for I am alone here, and have pleasant quarters," and the handsome sergeant held out his hand and warmly welcomed his young guest, whose knapsack and other belongings a soldier just then brought up, while Ned asked:

"Does that mean my Chum also, Sergeant Arden?"

"Yes, indeed, for I love dogs."

"Then I leave you in good company, Ned."

"Go to see the colonel this evening, and drop in on me before you go away," and Captain Baldwin, returning the sergeant's salute, walked off in the discharge of his duties.

"Now, Master Osmond, you look as though you had had a hard time, so come in and brush up so you will feel better, and then we can discuss what business you have with me."

"Thank you; I will accept your invitation, and while I am getting presentable you can read this letter—it was given me by your mother to deliver to you personally. Are you ill, sergeant?" and Ned sprang toward the soldier, who turned deathly pale and dropped heavily into a chair.

"My mother, did you say?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Yes, sir."

"Boy, my mother is dead—she died in Europe over a year ago."

"You are mistaken, sergeant. Your mother is not dead, for I saw her not two months ago, and she asked me to give this letter to you personally, as she could get no word from you, though she had often written."

"There is some trickery here," said Sergeant Arden, and he took the letter, glanced at the address, and added:

"Yes, that is my mother's hand—God bless you, boy," and the voice of the strong man quivered as he uttered the words.

Ned went into the cabin and took from his pack some clean clothing, and set to work with soap and water to make himself look less like a tramp.

Chum lay down at the door to rest after his long run, while the sergeant sat down upon the bench, his mother's letter in his hand.

He looked at it as he might if it was the miniature of a loved one, and for some time did not appear to have courage enough to open it.

It was addressed to

"Private Arthur Arden, Fort Vidette."

"Kindness of a trusted friend."

The name of his company and regiment was not given.

"Yes, it is my dear mother's writing,

and she is not dead, for that boy would not deceive me. I will read it."

He broke the seal with the look of one who was about to dissolve a mystery.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BOY TRAMP'S PLEDGE.

When Ned Osmond came out of the cabin he looked like a different boy. He had cast off his travel-worn clothing for a new suit of corduroy pants, which were stuck in the tops of a pair of well-polished boots, while he had put on a negligé shirt and gray jacket.

His belt of arms he had discarded while in the fort, and, looking refreshed by his bath and change, the sergeant at once noted the improvement and said:

"You are a different looking fellow, now, Osmond, and are strikingly like Buffalo Bill—a pocket edition of him, I might say; but, sit down and let us have a talk together until supper, for I have no duties until to-night at twelve. I have something particular to talk to you about."

Ned Osmond liked the young sergeant at sight; he had found Joe Jarvis a clever fellow, and been instantly won by Buffalo Bill, admired Colonel Benham and Captain Baldwin, and, in fact, concluded that the far frontier might have its drawbacks, but it was certainly peopled by persons to tie to.

He sat down on the bench by the sergeant, who, still holding the letter in his hand, said, by way of opening the conversation:

"This letter is from my mother."

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you get it?"

"Your mother gave it to me."

"When did you see her?"

"Two months ago."

"Where was she then?"

"Near Detroit."

"She lives there, then?"

"Yes, sir. Do you not know where she is, sir?"

"Yes, now, according to this letter; but I wish to know all about her that you can tell me. Do you know the contents of this letter?"

"No, sir; but I can guess that you are told a secret in it."

"See here, Osmond, you come to me a stranger, and yet you bear an important, a most important letter to me from my mother whom I have mourned as dead for some time."

"This letter tells me that she lives, yet is dead to the world, and I wish you to frankly tell me what you know of my mother now—in fact, all that you can, and then you shall hear my story."

"I do not seek your confidence, Sergeant Arden, I simply did my duty in bringing that letter to you."

"But I wish you to hear what I have to say, and then you may be able to tell me more."

"Now, when did you meet my mother?"

"I am a tramp, sir, you know, for when I left the sea I determined to go West, and not being rich I went on foot in good weather and through the country."

"I did not have my dog, then, for it was before I reached Chicago."

"I was tramping along one afternoon before reaching Detroit, Michigan, when a terrible storm rose, and I was wondering if I dared go to a large residence and ask for shelter, when I saw a young girl crouching by the roadside."

"She was talking to herself; her hair was down her back; she was barefoot and had a doll in her arms."

"I at once saw that she was mad, and supposing she had escaped from the large building, I spoke to her, and after some time got her to return with me."

"The place was a private asylum, and she was one of the patients—an heiress, poor thing, but without any mind."

"The physician in charge seemed most delighted to recover her, and as the storm was about to break, urged me to spend the night and wished to reward me, for he offered me a hundred dollars, which I of course refused."

"I did remain all night, though, and I sat in the physician's office, talking with him, he wondering why I, a boy tramp, refused the reward he urged upon me."

"I told him I was going West, out to this part of the country, and I heard an exclamation and saw a lady in the adjoining room."

"She was tall, slender, and had white hair, yet her face was youthful and even beautiful."

"She saw me looking at her, shook her head and put her finger to her lips, the physician not having noticed her presence."

"I was given a comfortable room, a good breakfast in the morning and went to the office to thank the doctor for my entertainment."

"He was not there, having been called to one of the wards; but the lady I had seen the night before was there, and coming quickly up to me, she said:

"I am held here against my will, for they say I am crazy, but I am not."

"I heard you say you were going out to the Indian country, and my son is there, a private in the —th Cavalry, stationed now, I believe, at Fort Vidette."

"I have written and written in vain to him, for I get no answer, so I implore you, for the love of God, to give him this letter."

"Give it to him only; let it pass through no other hands, and you will have the reward of knowing you have done a good deed, if you do not find a reward more substantial some day. Don't fail me, I implore you," she urged of me."

"I could do nothing but promise her and she quickly disappeared, just after which the doctor came in."

"He tried again to force money upon me, saying the patient I had brought back was worth thousands to him a year, and as I still refused he had a man drive me on to Detroit."

"I have kept my pledge, sir, to your mother, and delivered you the letter."

"You have, indeed; but did you learn nothing about her?"

"I asked the man who drove me to Detroit about a number of the patients I saw there, for the doctor showed me over the place."

"Your mother did not strike me as being insane, but the man told me she was, and had been put there by her husband, who was very rich."

"That is all I can tell you, sir."

"It is enough; now you shall hear my story," said the sergeant, in a stern, determined way.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SERGEANT'S STORY.

"You saw my mother, my friend, and you would hardly expect to find her son in the ranks of the army, without some cause for his being there, you would think, which he had brought upon himself."

So the sergeant began his story, and he found in Ned Osmond an attentive listener.

The sergeant had been deeply moved by the letter from his mother, and what Ned had told him of her, but he now very calmly began to tell his story to the youth, seeming anxious that he should know all.

"I tell you what I do, boy pard, in absolute confidence, and I know you will so receive it."

"I will, sir, but I do not seek your confidence."

"I know that, yet I wish you to be fully informed."

"Now, I entered the army as a private nearly three years ago, and under the name I now bear, Arthur Arden."

"It is my name, but not all of it, for my full name is Arthur Arden Holt, but the name my mother bears is that of Mrs. Alexander Elwell."

"Yes, so the man who drove me called her."

"My father, Judge Arthur Holt, was a very rich man, and our home was in Maryland."

"I was an only son, and I was sent to the Naval Academy, but was, with several other midshipmen, suspended for breaking the laws, though I was not guilty, but could not clear myself without implicating a classmate, so I took the blame and resigned."

"My father then sent me to Germany to finish my education, and among the other American students there was one whom I had known in boyhood, and whom I never liked."

"He constantly sought trouble with me, and the result was that a duel followed, in which I wounded him seriously."

"I left the university, and he was brought back to America, where he died, some months after, of the wound I had given him."

"My father had supplied me liberally with money, so I went to the East and entered the service of the Khedive of Egypt, and my father had been dead nearly a year before I learned of the fact."

"Believing that I had inherited a large fortune, I wrote my mother that I was going to resign and come home as soon as I heard from her."

"It was six months before I heard from her, and then she told me that I had better remain where I was, that my father's fortune was so mortgaged it was worthless, but that his partner, Alexander Elwell, was trying to save her something from the wreck, but his son, whom I had wounded in the duel, was dead, and he would never forgive me for killing him, and vowed he would send me to prison if I ever came to America."

"It was a bitter letter to read, but it was all true, as I believed, and the next I heard from home was that my mother had married Alex. Elwell, my father's partner."

"I grew homesick, and desired to return to America, and with what money I had saved from my pay, I did so."

"But I was afraid Elwell would keep his threat, so I went to California, then drifted into Mexico, and next enlisted in the army at a Texas fort."

"I could hear nothing from home, so at last boldly wrote my mother to the old address, and the letter came back to me bearing the written announcement on the back that my mother was dead."

"Then I settled down to try and win promotion in the army from the ranks, and I have gotten to be a sergeant, when now you come with this letter from my mother."

"It is remarkable, and there must be some trickery at the bottom of it," said Ned Osmond, deeply interested in the young sergeant.

"Yes, there has been most diabolical trickery throughout, for my mother's letter you shall see."

"She is no more crazy than you are, and Alex. Elwell told her a pack of lies about my father's fortune, she says, for it was clear of debt, but all tied up with Elwell's affairs."

"She says that the will left him full control, and I know that my father did trust him most implicitly."

"In that way he covered up his tracks, and as there was a codicil to the will, my mother says, disinheriting me for killing Alex. Elwell's son in the duel in Germany, I need expect nothing, while a second codicil urged that my mother, after one year's mourning, marry Elwell."

"This she did, and then she began to realize that her husband had deceived her, that the will was a forgery, that my father had left a large fortune, had never disinherited me, nor urged her to marry Elwell."

"Fearing my mother, for the discovery had made her very ill, Elwell had taken her to a private asylum near Detroit and had her incarcerated there."

"Now, Ned, you have my story, and there is my mother's letter for you to read, so tell me what you think of it."

Ned Osmond read the letter, and then said, bluntly:

"I think Elwell ought to be called down, for he is a black-hearted villain."

"Yes, and I will call him down, as you say, though now I can do nothing, for I am working hard to stand the examination for promotion from the ranks, which a number of us are striving for."

"If I get it, I am a free man, and can act; but for the present my hands are tied, though in some way I must communicate with my poor mother, telling her to cheer up and have patience. But come, supper is ready," and the sergeant led the way to the mess hall, Chum going along also by special invitation.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE TRAMP AGAIN.

Ned heartily enjoyed his supper with the sergeant, and he was introduced to a number of the non-commissioned officers present.

Sergeant Arden was a very popular man, and his young guest was warmly welcomed, while the rumor had already gone about that Ned had proved himself a hero, killing an outlaw and capturing two others.

The truth of his adventures was not known, but enough was told to make a hero of him.

The youth did not forget to go to headquarters in the evening to see the colonel.

He found the colonel in the midst of the family circle, but the orderly said that he had orders to show him right in, so, blushing at his position, Ned obeyed.

The colonel greeted him most cordially, presented him to his wife, daughter, and several others that were present, and said:

"I wanted you to see how we live out here among the redskins, Osmond, and I trust you will be willing to remain at the fort, so that we can make a soldier or a scout out of you after a while."

"I thank you, sir, and I know I would enjoy the life; but I have a certain duty to myself to perform, so I cannot remain, and to-morrow will start for Mountain City," replied Ned, who was as easy in his manners as though he had been accustomed to just such society all his life.

"So soon you must go—why, we have a grand parade to-morrow afternoon, so I insist that you remain to see that."

"I will, sir, with pleasure," was the answer, and Ned turned to talk with Mrs. Benham, who had become greatly interested in the youth, and said:

"I agree with the colonel that you should be called Little Buffalo Bill, for my daughter so named you, having seen you arrive this morning, and you are strikingly like the great scout in looks, bearing and even in mannerisms."

"I should consider it a great honor, madam, to be called Little Buffalo Bill, for the Chief of Scouts has been my ideal of a man ever since I could read, and

when I was a sailor boy I was reading pirate stories at any time I could get hold of a novel written on the falo Bill."

"Yes, Cody is our hero at the fort here, and deservedly so; but is not that your comrade on your long tramp?" and Mrs. Benham pointed to Chum, who just then appeared in the door, having passed the sentry, who had no desire to challenge his right to enter headquarters.

"Pardon him, madam, but he is looking for me."

"I will take him away."

But Mrs. Benham said Chum must remain, and Anita, her daughter, a pretty girl of thirteen, who had named Ned Little Buffalo Bill, called the dog in and he went right up to her.

All admired the splendid dog and his love of his young master, and he got a caress all round, and only left when Ned did.

"That boy is an unfathomable mystery to me," said the colonel, when Ned had left, and one and all agreed that the young tramp was a gentleman in disguise, a hero, and knew how to keep his own counsel.

The next day Ned and Chum were interested spectators of the grand parade.

The whole force was out, and as Ned stood by Mrs. Benham and Anita, admiring Sergeant Arden's splendid appearance as a soldier in full-dress cavalry uniform, the adjutant suddenly called "Attention," and an officer and platoon of soldiers marched up to the boy, and, to his surprise, he was conducted to the front of the command.

Then, to his intense surprise and embarrassment, a "special order" was read, stating his acts of heroism, and complimenting him for his valuable services rendered.

Ned could only raise his hat in salutation, and seek to hide himself from sight in the crowd, but in this he was unsuccessful, for Colonel Benham presented him to a score of officers and as many ladies and young people, until he was glad to get away, and he said to Sergeant Arden:

"If I were to stay here they'd make a fool of me."

"Why, I hav'n't done anything to brag out here; but if they could have seen me some black night of storm at sea away up aloft in the rigging of a large ship, they might have thought I was taking big chances against death; but they are all very kind, sergeant, and I thank them."

That night Ned went to bid the colonel and his family good-by, dropped in upon Captain Baldwin for a few minutes, and having disposed of three of the four horses at a good figure, he considered himself quite rich.

His story of the attack and capture of the outlaws had been written down, and when he had turned over their effects to the colonel, they had been returned to him as his property.

The next morning early, mounted upon the best of the four horses, which he had kept for himself, with a good saddle and bridle, a belt of arms, rifle, lasso, roll of blankets and bag of provisions, he rode out of the fort, Chum trotting by his side, and was followed by a ringing cheer by the soldiers gathered at the stockade gate to see him off, Sergeant Arden being the last one to grasp his hand, for he was sergeant of the guard that day.

"Well, we are again on the tramp, Chum," said Ned, as he rode along on the trail to Mountain City.

Chum wagged his tail in response, and yet gave a longing look back at the fort, where he had certainly had as good a time as his young master.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CAUGHT IN THE TOILS.

Found no difficulty in following the trail to Mountain City, as it was a distinct one.

He had his noon-day meal with Chum, and toward evening was approaching the camps, when he saw several miners at a cabin on his right, and just where several trails diverged.

As he rode up to them to ask which trail he was to take to reach Mountain City, one of the men called out:

"Pards, that is Den Dunlop's horse."

"So it is," cried several voices together, and instantly Ned's bridle rein was seized and he was told to dismount, which he did, with a word to quiet Chum, who was showing fight.

"Say, young feller, you is ridin' Den Dunlop's horse, and he was found dying to-day on the trail, his hands tied behind his back, and looking awful, so you is the one as has did it, and you is durned young fer that kind o' work," said one of the men, and, as he spoke, others began to gather, coming along the different trails from the camps, on their way to Mountain City, a couple of miles distant.

"Kill the durned dog!" cried one, as Chum began to show his teeth.

"No, I wants a good dog—lasso him," cried the man who seemed to be the leader, and in an instant Chum was caught in the toils of several lariats.

Ned started to protect him, but he was covered by half a dozen revolvers, and he was forced to see Chum choked down, a collar and chain put on him, and he made fast to a tree, where he found himself when he recovered from his choking.

In the mean time Ned had told his story of how he got the horse, that the man found bound and dying was doubtless the outlaw who had escaped.

"He calls Den Dunlop an outlaw, pards!" shouted the men, who laughed derisively, while one said:

"It's to cover up his own crime."

"He's a boy horse thief."

"He killed poor Den."

"Yes, tied him to die in the mountains, and then stole his horse."

"Pards, he is a young outlaw."

"One of the Mounted Miners, I'll bet money on it!"

So the cries went the rounds until Ned said, angrily:

"You are a pack of lying sharks, all of you."

"Pards, we must string him up!"

This suggestion seemed to meet general approval, and as quick as a flash Ned was seized, his hands bound behind him, a lasso noose thrown over his head, and he saw death staring him in the face, for the men were in deadly earnest.

Poor Chum lay upon the ground, tied to the tree and just beginning to recover from the severe choking he had been given.

There were now over a score of rough-looking, bearded men about the cabin, and a few of them urged that the boy should have a trial, have a chance to prove that he was not guilty.

But he had confessed to having bound the man who had escaped, and the horse had belonged to one of the three outlaws he had found afterward, and who had been captured by Buffalo Bill.

The men laughed at his saying Den Dunlop was an outlaw, and after a short conversation together, they decided that he was guilty of outlawry and also of stealing a horse, and must hang for his crimes, for that was border justice.

Ned had not flinched thus far, but when he felt assured that the men meant to hang him, he said, earnestly:

"Men, I have done no wrong, and Joe Jarvis, the Overland driver and Buffalo Bill can prove what I say."

"I am but a boy in years, and don't wish to die, to be hanged, so don't kill me, I beg of you."

"Begging don't go here, young feller," said the leader, and though half a dozen of the crowd now pleaded for him, he continued:

"Throw the end of the lariat over yonder limb and tie it to the horn of his saddle, and let the horse haul him up."

This was done, Ned Osmond saying:

"I begged you once to spare me, but I will not do it again, so do your worst."

"Now lead the horse up gently, pard," called out the leader to the man who was holding Ned's horse by the bridle.

But, as the horse took the first step, there came the report of a rifle; the animal dropped dead, and Buffalo Bill came dashing upon the scene, a revolver in each hand, while he shouted:

"Who dares lay hand on that boy to harm him dies like a dog!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

SAVED BY A SHOT.

The coming of Buffalo Bill so unexpectedly upon the scene created a sensation, for every miner there knew him, and more knew just what he would do, in his fierce anger.

The leader tried to explain that Ned had a stolen horse, an animal that belonged to one of their comrades, Den Dunlop, but that another pard had been riding for a few weeks past.

They told how Den Dunlop had been found dying, that morning—was then lying dead in their cabin—that his hands were tied behind him when they discovered him, and he could not speak.

Buffalo Bill strode into the cabin, took a glance at the body, and as he came out, threw the lariat off of the neck of Ned, and said:

"Boy pard, go in and see if that is your man who escaped."

Ned did so, and when he returned said that it was the man.

"There comes the coach! Go and head it off and tell Joe Jarvis to come here," commanded the scout of one of the men.

The order was obeyed and in silence the crowd awaited the coming of the driver, for his trail ran near the cabin.

He soon drove up, Ned being still hand-bound. Buffalo Bill ordered the leader of the plot against Ned to tell his story.

He did so, but was less confident now that he had the scout to deal with.

"Joe, look at the body in the cabin and say where you saw the man last and under what circumstances."

Joe Jarvis did so, and his words confirmed Ned's story.

"Now, men, you see that you were going to hang this innocent boy, and for your pard, whom you know now to have been one of the Mounted Miners, if you did not know it before, and I half believe that some of you did."

"Jim Sykes, you are lucky that I did not kill you instead of the horse, for I came near doing so, changing my intention merely for fear that the horse might in his fright drag the boy into the air."

"This young fellow is my boy pard, and as long as he chooses to remain in this country I am his protector."

"Me too, boy pard, and with Buffalo Bill I says hands off of him, men, and you knows I means what I says," cried Joe Jarvis.

Then Buffalo Bill resumed:

"If you don't get hanged yourselves, men, for harboring an outlaw, you will be in luck."

"Joe, you are starting on your run East, and I am going to the fort. Take the youth with you and bring him back again, so he won't be alone in Mountain City."

"I'll do it, so git up on the box with me, boy pard," ordered Joe, and Ned, with a grasp of Buffalo Bill's hand—for he was too much moved to speak—climbed up to a seat by the Overland driver.

The scout stripped the saddle and bridle from the dead horse and threw them up on the coach with the remark:

"I'll unfasten Chum and give him a ride with you, too."

This he did, and Joe Jarvis drove away with the remark:

"If they crowds you, Bill, just sound your war-cry and we'll come back."

"All right, but I have no fear of cowards who would hang a boy," replied Buffalo Bill, and, mounting his horse, he rode away amid a dead silence, in the crowd.

CONCLUSION.

Ned Osmond greatly enjoyed his drive with Joe Jarvis, and Chum, that had recovered entirely, seemed also to like the ride, finding that it was better than chasing behind the coach.

On the way the driver had much to tell his young pard about Buffalo Bill, Ned seeming never to tire of hearing of the great scout.

He also made known to Joe the story of his adventures after leaving him, his meeting Buffalo Bill, his brush with the other three outlaws, his affair with the redskins, and how he had been received at the fort and given the name of Little Buffalo Bill.

Then he told how the gang at the cabin had seized him, and that but for the scout they would have hanged him, adding:

"But they won't scare me out of this country, for I came to stay, at least until I had accomplished a certain mission."

"You, Joe, have proven my good friend, and I don't mind telling you, as a secret, that I came here to find one who had wronged me and mine. I know he is somewhere upon the frontier, and some day I will find him, though it may take me a year or more."

Then Joe Jarvis also told Ned a secret, and that was that he had recognized, in the outlaw that Chum had sprung upon and killed, his own brother—one who had gone to the bad early in life, and whom he had not heard of for years, and so was shocked to find him an outlaw.

Ned went on to the end of Joe Jarvis's run with him, and then back again, having an adventure upon his return which cannot be told here.

Arriving in Mountain City, he made that his headquarters, and went off on long trails often with Buffalo Bill.

In time he found the one he sought, and his mission was thus fulfilled, but he still clung to the Wild West, and became known far and wide along the frontier as Little Buffalo Bill.

It was through Ned, also, that the Sergeant got a letter to his mother, and the whole plot of her wicked husband, Elwell, was disclosed.

When the examination for promotion was held Arthur Arden won the first place, got the commission of a second lieutenant, and was successful in bringing Alexander Elwell to justice, and in securing his own rightful inheritance, while, of course, his mother was taken from the asylum, and all through her meeting with Ned Osmond, the Boy Tramp, who had well earned the, to him, proud title of Little Buffalo Bill.

THE END.

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